

Steve's story in his own words



My life was forever changed by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED).

Since I was a child, I wanted nothing more than to serve my Country in the military as did my father, grandfather, and other members of my family. In January 2007, I enlisted in the Army with the goal of starting as an infantryman and eventually becoming a Green Beret. In pursuit of that goal I graduated with honors from Fort Benning and earned a meritorious promotion. Soon after, I was stationed with the 4th Infantry Division out of Fort Hood, Texas. By the end of 2007, my platoon and I were in Iraq tasked to protect a General.

Eight months into my deployment, on May 13, 2008, myself and two other members of my squad made the decision to lead our convoy to a distant objective. As we drove through nighttime traffic on the outskirts of Baghdad, an insurgent detonated an IED. The searing metal hit the truck on the front passenger side and the blast of shrapnel ripped through the vehicle commander—my closest friend in Iraq—Sergeant Victor Cota.

The shrapnel also peppered my face and gouged a hole in my neck barely missing the carotid artery. Another piece tore into my left thigh, near the femoral artery. Had either artery been clipped, I could have bled to death in a minute or two. More shrapnel sliced into my right biceps and forearm, and a piece gashed my left forearm near the elbow, mangling the nerves and blood vessels. But it was a tiny shard of jagged metal that caused the most profound damage. Boring through my right temple, it ruptured my right eye, cut both optic nerves, damaged my sinuses, and lodged behind my left eye.

Over the next six weeks, I had over a dozen surgeries to remove shrapnel and repair the damage that included a fractured nose, fractured eye orbits, fractured skull, and 3rd degree burns. A severed artery and a number of severed nerves that disabled my right leg and left arm. I permanently lost my vision and am now legally blind.

What bothered me most was (and is) the loss of my friend, Sergeant Cota, and being separated from my squad.

In my first weeks at the hospital, I met another visually impaired soldier further along in recovery, and we talked about life without sight. "What he hated the most is that "you forget what people look like. You forget what your family looks like."

I haven't yet forgotten my family's faces, but for me they will always be stuck in time as they were the last time I saw them. The faces of some friends have faded, now no different from the undeterminable faces of those I've met since the injury. - But I refused to give up...

In July 2009, I was invited to compete as a cyclist in the State Games of America held in Colorado Springs. A few months later, I competed in a half Ironman in Augusta, Georgia. Over the next months I climbed the third highest volcano in Mexico with a team sponsored by Global

Explorers including blind adventurer Erik Weihenmayer. At 17,126 feet, Ixta (Ixtaccíhuatl) is also the seventh highest peak in North America and a true challenge. I reached the Summit on Veterans Day. I also summited a 20,000-foot ice-covered mountain in Nepal and Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak. I've white-water kayaked and scuba-dived and snowshoed - many of the excursions funded by groups that help wounded veterans. Between races and climbs, I'm taking online classes at the American Military University, hoping to study international relations or intelligence studies, not sure where it will lead. Someday I hope to climb Mount Vinson, Antarctica's highest peak, scuba-dive on the Great Barrier Reef, travel through Egypt and Israel, and sail across an ocean. Recently, with the help of the Blinded Veterans Association, I had the great honor and opportunity to travel to England to meet with war blinded British army veterans through program called Project Gemini where war blinded veterans from IED's get to meet each other.

All this to show others that obstacles can be overcome and all it takes is dedication and the will to succeed.

On October 13th, thanks to the generosity of Mr. Ian Anderson (Jethro Tull) and support from the Global Campaign against IEDs and the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA). I personally met Mr. Anderson and was guest as this legendary musician performed his classics Thick as a Brick and Thick as a Brick 2. Another once in a lifetime opportunity made possible by a musician who is raising the call to action against IEDs.

My experiences are, in part, is why I strongly encourage everyone to support actions of the Global Campaign against IEDs.

Over 84% of U.S. military combat injuries in Afghanistan and Iraq are due to IEDs including 249,480 with hearing loss; 222,600 TBIs, 210,202 experiencing PTSD; and 110,022 with vision impairments. 34% of IED victims suffer from both hearing and vision loss and 75% of TBI victims have visual dysfunctions. Percentages may be higher for civilian victims like those at the Boston Marathon because they lacked military protective equipment.

I would not have been able to recover and achieve what I have without the assistance and encouragement of Blinded Veterans Association (BVA). I had never heard of the Global Campaign against IEDs until they were introduced to me by the BVA. They actually reached out to me and offered assistance. I've since become aware of all they do for veterans, active duty, and civilian IED victims as well as working with the Public Safety sector to reduce IEDs by eliminating root causes through their holistic approach. This work is invaluable and should be fully supported by the public and private sectors.