



Sergeant Sarah Webster



Flight Sergeant Tony Benfer



Able Seaman Paul de Gelder

# SPORT

## THE BEST MEDICINE

WORDS: CORPORAL MELANIE SCHINKEL, MICHAEL BROOKE AND BRIAN HARTIGAN



On 14 August 2006, Corporal Sarah Webster nearly lost her life when an insurgent rocket struck and penetrated a concrete protection barrier (t-wall) (pictured below left) near her sleeping quarters in Baghdad's 'Green Zone'.

Nearly six years later and still on the long road to recovery, Sergeant Sarah Webster marked a major milestone in her rehabilitation by winning four gold and two silver medals at the US Marine Corps wounded Warrior Trials in February this year.

Speaking to ARMY Newspaper, Sergeant Webster gave the following advice to military personnel rehabilitating from life-changing injuries.

"Firstly, you must focus on yourself – you need to get better. Then you can figure out what to do with your military career, then you can understand whether or not you're capable of doing the job you once did or accept that you have to make a compromise," Sergeant Webster said.

She also urged more wounded and injured ADF personnel to get involved in the ADF Paralympic Sports Program, saying the sport and camaraderie would be very beneficial to their rehabilitation and recovery.

Proof of her own commitment to recovery via sport, Sergeant Webster won four gold and two silver medals at the US Marine Corps Trials at Camp Pendleton, California, in February.

And proof of the camaraderie involved and of her own generous spirit, Sergeant Webster gave some of her medals away.

She won the 100m female open dash, the 200m female open, the 1500m female run, the 50m female open freestyle swim, and was runner-up in the 100m female open freestyle and the 4x50m open freestyle relay.

"I'm really surprised by my success," she said.

"It felt pretty good to win but for me the event wasn't about winning medals.

"The best thing I got out of participating was being able to talk to other allied forces and US personnel who had been through similar situations to me.

"I gave a few of my medals to guys on the allied team who couldn't compete because they were injured during the training period.

"A US liaison officer, who also couldn't compete, was a keen collector of military memorabilia, so I gave him one as a souvenir, too.

"It just seemed like the right thing to do. "I had won six medals that were probably just going to sit inside a drawer. I thought I might as well give them to someone who would really appreciate them by putting them on display or keeping them as collector's items.

"There were so many inspiring people at the trials. I met one young guy who, among other injuries, had a broken back and double lung transplant and was told he would never walk again.

"Do you think that stopped him?

"He was up and about, swimming in the pool and competing.

"It was amazing to watch people with a range of disabilities getting on with their lives and succeeding."

Despite her recent success and her disarmingly large and warm smile, the road to recovery hasn't been easy for Sergeant Webster.

On 14 August 2006, she sustained an open skull fracture, torn spleen, dislocated hip, broken kneecap and blunt-force trauma to her lower leg after a 122mm rocket exploded outside her room in Baghdad.

She was sound asleep when the rocket crashed into the Australian Security Detachment compound.

"I was concussed by the impact, so I didn't wake up immediately. Actually, I didn't really come around until after surgery," she said.

"The Americans came to my aid and I was immediately taken to their combat support hospital.

"Australia didn't have any embedded staff in the hospital at the time, so I was very thankful to the American medical staff for their professionalism and support in Iraq and later on in Germany."

She spent about two days in the combat support hospital and 10 days in a medical facility in Germany before she was stable enough to return to Townsville for further treatment.

"Army got me through all my recovery and rehabilitation, which involved a combination of physiotherapy, hydrotherapy and balance classes," she said.

"I couldn't sit up for about six weeks. After eight weeks I was relearning to walk.

"That really sucked.

"It was a very frustrating period for me.

I had to tell myself 'if you want to recover properly and keep doing your job, you must put in the massive effort required to do that. Yes, you do want to keep your job and you do want to deploy overseas again and do that job to its fullest capacity.'

After five hard months of recovery, Sergeant Webster's dedication and determination brought her back to full-time work. Three months later she was working out in the field and in 2008 she deployed to Afghanistan for six months.

"Going back to work was a bit strange at first because I didn't have anyone I could relate to.

"People were awkward because they didn't know how to act around me, but eventually things went back to normal.

"I certainly wasn't command's first choice to send back into a combat zone, but I

pushed for it and eventually I was deemed suitable for the job and they let me go.

"Deploying again really helped me. I think if I hadn't gone it would have always bothered me not knowing whether I could cope in that environment again.

"It was definitely something I needed to do."

Looking towards the future, Sergeant Webster's triumph at the Marine Corps Trials has motivated her to develop her swimming skills further in hopes of competing again next year.

She is also investigating how she can provide support and assistance to other injured military personnel during their rehabilitation.

"I'm looking into how I can get involved in Defence's rehabilitation and recovery process. Defence has three rehabilitation and recovery centres and I'd love to be posted to one of those facilities," she said.

"I've been through the process and made my way back to work. It would be nice to help others travel down that path to recovery."

Although Sergeant Webster's rehabilitation has progressed well, she still suffers from ongoing orthopaedic issues and degenerative arthritis.

### The Team

Sergeant Webster was one of seven ADF competitors who won a total of 14 gold medals, three silver and two bronze at the US Marine Corps Trials.

The Australian team included amputees, a double amputee, members who have experienced traumatic brain injury and other service- and non-service-related injuries.

Warrant Officer Class One Scott Mengel, Warrant Officer Class Two Dennis Ramsay, Sergeant Webster, Signaller Gary Wilson and Private Kyle Bridgewood represented the