



# SUFFERING IN SILENCE

## Helping vets recover from traumatic brain injuries



by Kimberlee Charchan

**I**t hits you. You may not even realize it, not yet. But in that instant, your whole world changes.

Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs) are silent and hidden. They're caused when a sudden trauma or head injury disrupts the function of the brain. And they're considered the invisible wounds of our veterans, especially those from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars.

"They're (TBIs) considered the signature wounds of the current conflicts," says Capt. Jeremy Briggs, an FCA US employee who is currently serving in the Michigan Army National Guard. "I think TBIs are more prevalent than people realize."

Briggs knows firsthand. He served as a Medevac Pilot for four years and as a military police officer for 4½ years. He spent time in Iraq and Afghanistan. He's volunteered for the Brain Injury Association of Michigan and helps veterans recover from TBIs.

Briggs is an assembly supervisor at the Pilot Assembly Plant at the Chrysler Technology Center in Auburn Hills, Michigan, and at Conner Avenue Assembly in Detroit. He is currently the Commander of an Air Assault Company, Aviation Maintenance Detachment in the Michigan Army National Guard and is a UH-60M Blackhawk helicopter pilot. Briggs started his military career in 2005 and was deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom as an enlisted Military Police team leader, driver and gunner, and as an officer in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan where he was a Forward Support Medevac Platoon Section Leader and Medevac Pilot.



*Medevac pilot Capt. Jeremy Briggs serves in the Michigan Army National Guard and is a Pilot Assembly Supervisor at the Chrysler Technology Center.*

He says TBIs are underdiagnosed and underreported. He believes a lot of veterans don't know they have a TBI or won't admit it. "A lot of times guys think they're too tough to try to get help or they think there's nothing wrong, so family members or friends have to step in to help them get medical treatment."

Symptoms can include headaches, confusion, light-headedness, changes in mood, trouble with memory and concentration, and in severe cases, there can be vomiting or nausea, seizures, slurred speech and weakness. These symptoms can appear immediately or take weeks or even months to show up.

Improvised Explosive Devices, rocket-propelled grenades and land mines are the leading causes of TBIs in active duty military personnel in combat zones, according to the Brain Injury Association of Michigan. A Johns Hopkins Public Health article says more than 260,000 troops have been affected by TBIs since 2001.

"There were a lot of people who had them (TBIs)," says UAW Local 889 member John Renard, who was a combat medic in the U.S. Army from 2010 to 2013 and received a Combat Medical Badge for performing duties under fire.

He believes TBIs were underreported because they're so common. "Either (victims) didn't think they had them, or the documentation was wiped away, or they got treated only one time."

Renard is a supply and demand analyst at the Auburn Hills (Michigan) Complex. While in the military, he was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and was in the 101st Airborne, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1/61 Cavalry. He was deployed to Afghanistan where he was involved in patrol combat missions that

included air assault operations that required helicopter transport to remote locations.

Briggs says TBI symptoms can be very similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. "PTSD and TBIs share a lot of the same symptoms, so sometimes it's very hard for doctors to differentiate between the two. Sometimes diagnosing a TBI can be very difficult, so people really have to go to specialists to try to get treatment."

In the Johns Hopkins report, researchers said the military failed to document about 80 percent of the TBIs in the early years of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. That means documentation exists for only one in five troops who sustained head trauma between 2003 and 2006. The study says an estimated 21,257 troops sustained TBIs in that time period, more than four times the cases recorded by the Pentagon.

Renard says the failure to report TBIs happened often. "When you were overseas, unless you ensured that documentation was brought back stateside, the VA (Veterans Administration) looked at it like nothing happened. Some guys whose documentation was lost, didn't receive any service-related disability."

It wasn't until late 2006 and 2007 that the military enacted policies to identify TBIs and began routine screening. But the study concludes that between 2003 and 2010, an estimated 32,822 combat personnel still suffered undocumented TBIs.



*Camp Liberty helps wounded veterans recover from their injuries through outdoor activities.*

The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center says, based on existing data, veterans' advocates believe that between 10 and 20 percent of Iraq veterans, or 150,000 to 300,000 people, have some level of TBI.

The Johns Hopkins article points out that there are now more resources available for veterans suffering from TBIs despite the lack of documentation for this condition. Officials at the U.S. Army's Office of the Surgeon General say concussion care centers are being established and there's more TBI research. ■

## Rehabilitating through nature

Jeremy Briggs is on the board of Camp Liberty, a facility in Jackson County, Michigan, focused on rehabilitating veterans with Traumatic Brain Injuries through the use of outdoor recreation programs.

"We focus on trying to get them out using nature to rehabilitate, so we go

camping, hiking, nature walking, hunting and fishing," he says.

The exposure to nature makes a difference for TBI victims: "Camp Liberty has been phenomenal," says Briggs. "It's hard to explain, but you get a small group of military guys together, and we share stories and talk about dealing with coming back to civilian life.

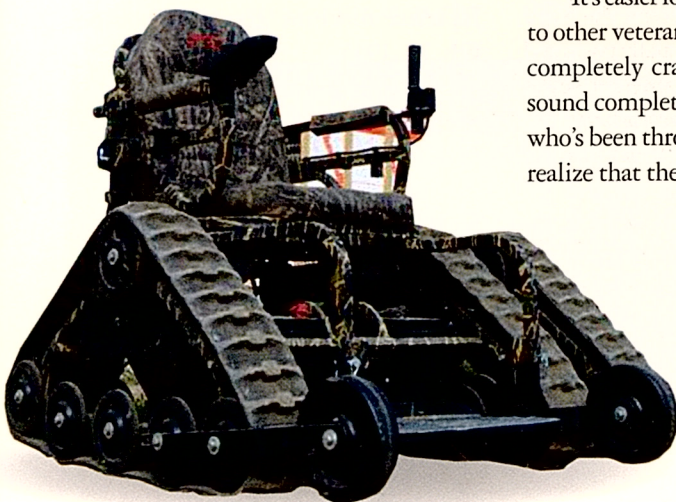
"It's easier for veterans to talk and open up to other veterans. Things that might sound completely crazy or insane to you, might sound completely normal to somebody else who's been through it. Veterans just have to realize that they're not alone, and that they



should not be afraid to ask for help."

Briggs is humble about his efforts to help veterans.

"It's not just me, there are a lot of veterans helping out with Camp Liberty and with numerous other nonprofits because we want to help," he says. "We're still brothers and sisters so there's a bond there. We just have to help each other out." ■



*Track chairs at Camp Liberty allow injured veterans to participate in outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting.*



# United we STAND

As of July 2015, nearly 6,500 active FCA US LLC employees from union and management had answered the call to military duty. This honor roll shows the number of veterans and current members of the National Guard or Reserves by location.

Arizona Proving Grounds .....	26		
Auburn Hills Complex .....	1,234	Kokomo Casting .....	190
Belvidere Assembly .....	491	Kokomo Transmission .....	590
Chelsea Proving Grounds .....	68	Mack Ave. Engine .....	82
Conner Avenue Assembly .....	16	Marysville Axle .....	105
Dundee Engine .....	96	Mopar. Parts Distribution Ctrs .....	255
FCA US Transport .....	67	Mopar Service & Parts .....	24
Indiana Transmission I and II .....	473	Mt. Elliott Tool & Die .....	31
Jefferson North Assembly .....	460	Sales & Mkt. Business Centers .....	60
		Sterling Heights Assembly .....	292
		Sterling Stamping .....	290
		Tipton Transmission .....	145
		Toledo Machining .....	165
		Toledo Assembly Complex .....	577
		Trenton Engine Complex .....	159
		Warren Stamping .....	214
		Warren Truck Assembly .....	374



Total number of veterans: 6,484

Source: FCA US Human Resources Department