

For a new generation of wounded veterans, one day a year is special. It's the day they didn't die. They call it their ...

# Alive Day

BY STEVE MADDEN

ALEX LEONARD, a former specialist in the 101st Airborne, is at the gym, getting ready to work out. His truck is out front, his baseball cap is on backward, heavy metal pounds from the speakers. Just another 30-year-old guy, doing what 30-year-old guys do. But this day, September 25, 2013, is a little different: It's Leonard's Alive Day, the tenth anniversary of the day a roadside bomb blew off Leonard's right leg and injured his left so badly that he would eventually lose it too.

**A**LIVE DAY is not, strictly speaking, a formal thing, and probably not something you've ever heard of if you haven't had the occasion to celebrate it or are not part of the military. It certainly isn't something national, like Veterans Day or Memorial Day. But to American soldiers who have been wounded—physically, mentally, or both—in battle, Alive Day is a very real thing: It is the anniversary of the day you were wounded, the day your life changed. The day you could have been killed, or were almost killed, but weren't. It's the day death came right alongside you, and maybe took some of your friends, but didn't take you. You may have survived with terrible wounds, maybe wounds nobody but you can see, but the fact is, you survived. You're alive. And that's a fact worth celebrating.

As he ties his sneakers, Leonard, now 31, tells his story, each little detail embroidered precisely in his memory. He forces himself to keep it vivid. He says he has to, although he's not sure why.

He remembers driving his Humvee past an airfield in Mosul, Iraq, and seeing a local man standing on the median of the busy road and thinking, That's peculiar. He remembers the whiplash in his neck and the thought

that his vehicle had been rear-ended, not bombed, and that he had driven into a sandstorm thick with dust and that was why he couldn't see anything. He remembers his brain feeling rattled, and he remembers looking left, at a credit card-size piece of shrapnel in his triceps, and pulling it out and

watching the blood seep down the sleeve of his fatigues. He remembers reaching to unbuckle his seat belt and not being able to feel his legs and realizing his right leg was gone and then suddenly being very, very aware of his situation, of the fact that he was “chewed up,” maybe

paralyzed. He remembers Eddie Broadway, the medic sitting next to him in the Humvee, helping him out of the cab and to the ground. And the extraordinary pain starting to set in.

As Leonard lay there in the dirt and stink on a road in Iraq, one thought dominated his mind: I'm paralyzed; I can just stick the barrel of my weapon under my chin and call it a day right here. But he put that thought away, for good, when the enemy started shooting at them, and his training kicked in. He wanted to return fire, so he told Broadway, “Fix me.” The medic applied a tourniquet to one leg to stop the bleeding while Leonard himself tied off the other. On the trip in the back of a truck to an Army hospital,

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Leonard's body swelled against his armor. Then his eyes swelled shut. He remembers realizing he wasn't paralyzed but horribly wounded, with one useful limb filled with IV lines.

He had five surgeries in one week in an Army hospital in Germany, then spent 385 days in Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, outside Washington, DC, learning to live with a new reality. Leonard was fitted with an artificial right leg; his left leg, badly damaged in the blast, was amputated three years later. Many of the hospital beds around him were filled with fellow members of the 101st Airborne.

But after all the support of the hospital and the military community, Leonard found himself adrift back in his home state of Montana, working in a bar, after he was released from Walter Reed. “That wasn't good,” he says. “I'd joined the Army out of high school to get out of Montana, and going back there wasn't what I had in mind.”

**O**N THIS bright San Antonio morning, Leonard tells me the story the way someone might describe a day at the office or a round of golf. An array of artificial legs made of carbon fiber and titanium are spread on the black rubber mats in front of him as he figures out which ones to use. “This one has batteries and a little computer,” he tells me, holding up the prosthetic, his arm covered with shrapnel scars and tattoos of

his Army unit. “It can tell if I'm walking up stairs or down.” He straps the new legs on, the right one above the knee, the left below, and makes sure all the connections are tight.

He consults with George Grimes, his CrossFit coach, about today's workout, a high-speed regimen of Olympic weight lifting moves, squats, and medicine ball tosses that would tax even an athlete who had the legs he or she was born with. Leonard gets to work and sets personal records, one for the amount of weight he thrusts above his head (125 pounds), the other for the time it takes to complete the workout: nine minutes and 51 seconds. Sweat, not blood, soaks Leonard's shirt as he gasps for air. He looks up. “That sucks,” he says. He's smiling.

A man asks if Leonard thought, ten years ago today, that someday he'd be throwing around heavy weights.

His answer is immediate. “There's a lot I didn't think I'd be doing,” he says. “That's why I make myself remember what happened on this day. Because I'm alive.”

**M**OST VETS, stretching back to World War II, can tell you the day they were wounded because for most it is a date as significant as a wedding day or a child's birthday. But the more active celebration of the day—with gatherings and remembrances—started to gain traction with Vietnam vets and is fairly common with veterans of the wars

in Iraq and Afghanistan. Groups that support veterans, like the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), are urging veterans to make note of their special day as part of the healing process and as a way to reintegrate into the non-combat world. "You could look at it as a celebration of the Day I Didn't Die," says John Roberts, executive vice president of warrior relations for the WWP and himself a wounded vet. "It can take a few years for guys to see Alive Day as a good thing, but it can be taken as a sign of rebirth."

Since the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts began in 2001 and 2003, respectively, some 670,000 soldiers—one quarter of all who served—were injured severely enough in some way to be given disability status. Many soldiers are coming home with profound physical injuries that will require a lifetime of attention and treatment, care whose costs can run into the trillions of dollars over the warriors' lifetimes. And more are coming home with traumatic brain injuries from concussions, often the result of the roadside bombs the enemies use that can turn the inside of armored vehicles into chambers that amplify blast waves. Thousands of soldiers are also being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and are seeking

treatment for it. In some ways, PTSD patients are the most challenging, and the ones in the most pain, because their wounds are invisible to a society that tends to think of wounds as only physical scars and missing limbs, if it thinks of them at all.

This is part of the reason Alex

Leonard counts himself among the lucky. "People can look at me and can see what happened," he says. "I look at some other guys and think, I don't have it so bad. I'd rather lose both legs than an arm or eye. The burned guys have it the worst. But I'm sure some guys look at me

and feel bad."

**T**HE FIRST FEW Alive Days can be difficult, as warriors remember friends who were killed and face survivor's guilt head-on. But that confrontation is ultimately what can help the warrior heal, says Roberts. "Alive Day provides an opportunity to come out of the experience a stronger person," he says. "But it takes time and help to get there."

Leonard got that help when he relocated to San Antonio and enrolled at the Center for the Intrepid, an intensive program at Brooke Army Medical Center (now called the San Antonio Army Medical Center) that works with amputees and burn victims to provide

**"Alive Day is like a rebirth," says John Roberts of the Wounded Warrior Project.**

*"I'll never know what I'm capable of until I give it a shot," says Leonard. He works out five days a week.*





cutting-edge care and education. He came into contact with other warriors who had lost limbs, quickly developing a bond with them as they worked toward mastering their new prostheses. Leonard also enrolled in school and will soon earn a degree in information technology management. "It's not every day you get a second chance. You have to take advantage of it," he says.

When asked if he thinks of himself as an inspiration, Leonard demurs and admits his reluctance to even talk with a reporter. "I just did the best I could with a situation that was handed to me," he says, being sure to note, as do many other veterans, that he willingly volunteered for the service, knew what he was getting himself into, and would do the whole thing all over again, with the same outcome, if he had to. He talks about his grandfather, a Seabee who fought his way across the Pacific during World War II. "He spent every day after the war trying to forget about what he saw," Leonard says. "I try to remember."

**L**ATER THAT NIGHT, there's beer at Alex Leonard's Alive Day party, and margaritas too. But it's low-key social drinking, the alcohol just a side dish to the sevice, chips, and salsa he and his friends came to this restaurant for. Most of the veterans here are guys Leonard met in his various rehab programs and who, like

him, have artificial legs. Tyler Sloan lost his when a sniper's bullet severed his femoral artery in Iraq. Josh Holm was a tanker who had his leg blown off in Iraq and proudly sports a T-shirt from the Tough Mudder adventure race series. John Deer lost his lower leg when North Vietnamese rounds pierced the floor of the helicopter he was piloting.

There are girlfriends here, and wives, one expecting, and a couple of trainers from the gym. Kirk Simondinger, the man who built their prostheses, is here, asking questions about devices and talking about stretching. They all talk about their lives, the everyday, the mundane. School, families, jobs, babysitters. The vets rib one another constantly and caustically, about everything and anything, and some of them sneak out for smokes.

On this night, there are no toasts, no speeches, very little talk about the injuries that have brought this group together. But at the end of the evening, there are a lot of backslaps and lingering bear hugs, the better to let the whispered words be heard. Leonard is all smiles and jokes. Because this is how you heal. With time and with a lot of help from your friends. **R**

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Steve Madden is a two-time National Magazine Award winner. His book, *Embrace the Suck* (HarperCollins), will be out in December.

To support the Wounded Warrior Project, go to [woundedwarriorproject.org](http://woundedwarriorproject.org).