



# Former NCO Burned in IED Blast Lifts Himself, Others Up Through Stand-Up Comedy

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**T**here's something striking about Bobby Henline. No, it's not the roughly depilated head or the craggy striations seared into the former staff sergeant's face, the result of a 2007 roadside bomb attack in Iraq that struck the humvee he was riding in. Henline was the only one of the vehicle's five occupants to survive the blast. More than 38 percent of his body was burned. His head was scorched to the skull. His left hand was so badly singed it would eventually be amputated. Despite 46 surgeries and six months of rehabilitation, Henline's likeness was permanently altered.

But that's not what sticks out about him.

What is most palpable about Henline, a San Jose, Calif., native, is his affable demeanor. He speaks with a quick hop-step cadence, punctuated often with a hearty laugh. The rhythm crescendos when he talks about his family, his fellow Soldiers, his friends or the thing that he says has helped him keep going after suffering such a harrowing ordeal — humor.

Today, Henline is a stand-up comedian. In fact, he is one of the industry's budding talents, having performed in some of comedy's meccas such as The Comedy Store in Los Angeles, and appearing in the Showtime documentary, "Comedy Warriors: Healing Through Humor."

Henline says he turned to comedy as a coping mechanism — his days vocally directing Soldiers as an NCO helped him summon the courage to take the stage for the first time. It ended up renewing his zeal for life. And he hopes sharing his story can help other injured — and sometimes disfigured — Soldiers face their lives with the same exuberance.

"I didn't think I'd get a job out of it," said Henline before a Fourth of July performance at the Joke Joint Comedy Showcase in Houston. "It was fun for me. It was a release. It's always how I like to deal with stuff, with my humor. So it was good for me. It was just a fun thing to do. And it just started building up and building up. Next thing you know, it's serious. Comedy got serious."

## 'That's All I Remember That Day'

Henline has only a couple vivid memories of the day his life changed.

It was April 7, 2007, and Henline was part of a convoy that was making stops at various forward operating bases, or FOBs, delivering supplies and transporting Soldiers north of Baghdad, Iraq. He was a part of the 82nd Airborne Division and was weeks into his fourth deployment.

“We were doing the typical, ‘Get the convoy ready,’ that morning,” he said. “There are two things I remember from that day. One was that there were two Soldiers in the vehicle who normally didn’t ride with me. I also remember getting a second cup of coffee. The S-4 captain, who was sitting behind me, he wasn’t there yet. So we were sitting around waiting, and I ran and grabbed another cup of coffee while we were waiting on him.

“That’s all I remember that day.”

Henline’s vehicle was at the front of the convoy traveling near the Diyala province village of Zaganiyah when an improvised explosive device detonated underneath it. The blast hurled the humvee nearly 50 feet down the road. Four Soldiers — Capt. Jonathan Grassbaugh, Spc. Ebe Emolo, Spc. Levi Hoover and Pfc. Rodney McCandless — were killed instantly. When fellow Soldiers reached the vehicle, they had to smother the flames burning Henline’s upper body and dig the broken teeth out of his mouth to allow him to breathe.

## Humor Amid Hardship

Two weeks later, Henline emerged from a medically induced coma at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, thus beginning a medical odyssey that would provide many painful moments, both physically and emotionally.

But one thing came easy to him — humor.

“I started joking around, even in intensive care, in the first month,” Henline said. “A lot of that I don’t remember. But I do remember one day they were walking me and I was mad because they wouldn’t give me water. And I wanted water. So I was walking around the nurses’ desk and I told them, ‘When I get out of here, we’re having a water party. Squirt guns, balloons. No alcohol allowed. Just water.’ I think that was the first time I really started joking around with people.”

Henline says laughter helped keep spirits high for him and the medical personnel working with him. It also helped his wife, Connie, and the rest of his family cope with their loved one’s ordeal and changed appearance.

“Joking around at the hospital, that was my way of using my sense of humor to let my family know I was OK, to let staff know I was OK,” he said. “It was how [I chose] to deal with the pain during physical therapy, laughing about it, joking with the other patients. I could see my family worrying. My mom couldn’t even get me a drink. She was shaking just trying to put the straw to my mouth, real scared. So it was kind of like, ‘Don’t worry, I’m still here. Even if today I’m kind of groggy.’ I’d still make a little joke to let them know, ‘It’s OK. I’m inside here. I just can’t move right now.’

“I think when I was talking a lot better and able to sit up and stuff, that’s when they were finally like, ‘OK, he’s still in there. He’s back. He’s still being that goofball.’”

## From Surgery To The Stage

Henline spent almost the next two years working to regain a sense of normalcy.

His face was scarred by the burns he suffered and puffed by various skin-graft surgeries. His left ear was gone; his right was reduced to a rough-hewn stub. His smashed left hand eventually became too painful to bear, and he asked doctors to amputate it. After removing the protective goggles he was forced to wear for a year, it took time to get accustomed to the stares.

While jokes helped, Henline couldn’t shake the notion that he needed to heed a call. He just didn’t know what it was. Then his occupational therapist made a “stupid” suggestion.

“One day she told me, ‘You should try stand-up comedy!’” Henline said. “She has this really high-pitched voice, one of those happy people all the time. ‘You’ve gotta try stand-up comedy. You’ve gotta try it!’ I’m like ‘That’s stupid. It’s not gonna work. This, here at the hospital, is funny. We could joke about it here.’ I wasn’t gonna go up on stage and people are gonna go, ‘Oh, you got blown up in Iraq? That’s funny.’”

Henline said he grew up admiring comedians such as George Carlin, Robin Williams and Bill Cosby. But he never considered actually taking a stage. However, after a steady stream of good-natured pestering from his therapist, he obliged, sealing the deal with a pinkie swear.

“My occupational therapist’s sister lives in L.A., and she’s in a band,” Henline said. “So one day, I’m going out there for a consultation to see a doctor. She tells me, ‘My sister’s in entertainment. She might know a place you could try it while you’re out there.’ Sure enough, her sister calls me and says, ‘Hey. Comedy Store. Go sign up at 5 o’clock.’”

Henline’s very first set took place August 2009 at the famed Los Angeles club on the same stage graced by some of comedy’s biggest names.

“It went horrible,” Henline remembers. “My joke I still do today about being a rare birth defect was the first joke I really wrote. No one laughed. But I tag it with, ‘And now my mom thinks she has the right to complain to me about her acid reflux.’ I didn’t think that was the joke. I thought the joke that my mom was in the circus as a fire-eater was the funny part. But they related to the acid reflux better. So I thought, ‘Wow, that’s really the punch line.’ When I got off stage, another comic said to me, ‘I really liked the part about the acid reflux.’ That gave me a little hint, like ‘OK, maybe I can write a joke.’”

And so, Henline returned to San Antonio, where he still resides to be near the medical facilities he frequents, and began performing open-mic sets three nights a week.

A year-and-a-half later, he was in Los Angeles when a chance meeting with a talent agent landed him an appearance in the Showtime documentary. The film,

released in April 2013, follows Henline and four other veterans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan as they work with comedy A-listers to explore their experiences through the healing power of humor.

## Heeding The Call

Henline's brush with some of comedy's biggest names did well to instill confidence in his work. But it was feedback from fellow wounded veterans that made him realize his newfound profession was something more than a personal outlet.

"Some of the best feedback I've heard comes from guys who are out of the military now," Henline said. "Two guys — burn survivors, [who] I visited in the hospital a long time ago — have said that what I do helps them. It helps them out in public. They both live in the San Antonio area. They both have been called 'Bobby Henline' in public — us burnt guys all look alike. They told me not to feel bad when people call me J.R. Martinez (another famed U.S. Army veteran and burn survivor), because they get the same thing, only they're called Bobby Henline, the comedian. But they said it really helps them. It's always breaking the ice for people to feel more comfortable coming up and talking to them. They said they like that.

"Once I started seeing that it could make a difference in people's lives by going on stage and making people laugh about this, it makes it easier for them, too, to approach somebody else when they see someone with a disfigurement. To know that, hey, we want to talk. We're not dead. We're the same person. We like to have dinner, have a drink, go to a movie. We have personalities. We're not all angry about what happened to us. It's OK to ask."

Henline has not limited himself to comedy for his outreach efforts. He conducts motivational speaking visits at schools, colleges, companies and churches. He makes himself available to other wounded warriors in San Antonio hospitals and clinics to give them someone to speak with that might better understand their experiences.

Henline also formed the Crosshairs Comedy troupe with other wounded veterans. The group performs at comedy clubs throughout the country, helping each other with their sets as well as with the emotional setbacks caused by their combat experiences.

Henline performed during Fourth of July weekend in Houston with two members of the troupe — Anthony Torino, a U.S. Air Force veteran, and Raul Sanchez, an Army veteran. Both men lauded Henline's efforts while on stage. Before the show, Torino jokingly lamented nearly receiving credit for one of Henline's signature jokes.

"We've done a lot of shows together, and I used to sit in the back of the audience," Torino said. "I used to work with people who were burnt [when I was] a therapist.

I'd watch Bobby's first sets and I was, like, 'People aren't paying attention to him. They're staring at him.' And he doesn't give them a chance to just look. He's used to it; I'm used to it. But the rest of the crowd is like, 'Holy heck.' And so I was, like, give them time to go, 'Holy heck.' And I was like, 'What could he say? — You should see the other guy!' Because he was in a fight, you know what I mean? And the first time he did it, it went great. Turned out to be perfect."

But Henline didn't deliver that opening line until he received the same advice from comedian Brad Garrett, a fact Torino dismisses.

"He wouldn't listen to me," Torino said. "But Brad Garrett tells him to do it, and ...

"Seriously, Bobby is funny. And all the good things he does for us and other people are just awesome."

## NCO Lessons Shine Through

Henline earned his sergeant stripes in 2004, just before joining the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. He says his days as an NCO continue to reverberate throughout his life, both personally and professionally.

"Definitely, being a Soldier helped a lot of things," Henline said. "Especially becoming an NCO — you're used to talking to the crowds and giving classes and things like that. Also, being burnt meant wherever I went, I got stared at. It didn't matter. So I figure if I went up on stage and I stood there and people stared at me, it'd be just like me going to Walmart. There wouldn't be anything different. The attitude of pulling through and making sure you're OK and all the training definitely comes into being strong."

Henline also says he enjoyed his days leading other Soldiers. He credits his time with younger Soldiers as the reason he can enjoy the camaraderie of his fellow troupe comics. They are lessons he feels today's NCOs can continue to employ.

"Leadership style? I'm definitely a participator," Henline said. "I delegate if there's enough people around. But if not, I'm gonna get in there. You don't want to lose a skill by just sitting there giving orders and demands and make everyone else do it, and then you forget how to do it yourself. I was maybe too soft sometimes when I needed to be a little meaner. But I'd rather talk to them and try to coach them that way. I wanted to learn about the individual, who they are. Because they're just like your children. You know, 'Which one handles being yelled at better? Which one learns better being talked to?' So as you get to know your Soldiers better, you can't just treat them all exactly the same. Because they're all different personalities and they respond differently. That goes for leadership in the military, raising kids, teachers in schools. In every type of leadership, you need to know what makes the best team. That's how you make your team work well together."

There's one more thing that drives Henline and keeps him feverishly on the trail of his comedic dreams.

"It's that same old thing, you've gotta drive on," Henline said. "Survivor's guilt was really bad for me in the beginning. But you've gotta live on for those who don't live anymore, the guys who sacrificed it all. There were four other

guys in that humvee who didn't make it. I sat on the couch, and I felt sorry for myself. I gave up. But what's that doing for them? I gotta live on for them. Any of them would trade places with me. They'd rather be in pain and look funny and be here. Their families would rather have them back. That's a big push for me that helps drive me on." ■

## Henline Highlights

### A Selection Of Bobby Henline's Jokes

- "I was burned over 38 percent of my body. Yes, I expect a discount at my cremation."
- "I don't know if you girls know this, but once you go cooked, you're hooked."
- "I did four tours in Iraq. I loved my job. I had a great time. But seriously, that last tour was a real blast. ... My humvee got blown up by a roadside bomb. The crazy thing is that it took me four tours and an IED just to figure out my lucky number was three."
- "I love messing with people. I love going to CVS or Walgreens. I get a hand basket and fill it up full of scar removal. I just want to see the look on the cashier's face. ... I love Fourth of July. I go to the fireworks stands and say, 'Just give me the same stuff you gave me last year. It was great!'"
- "Over the last six years, I've had 46 skin-graft surgeries. I don't know if you know what that is but, basically, they take good skin from one part of your body to replace the burnt skin in another part. Essentially, they make a skin quilt out of you. They took my stomach and put it on top of my head. Now, I gotta pick lint out of my ears. I get a headache when I eat too much. And that's not even the worst of it — I'm mooning all of you right now."
- "If my comedy career does take off, I'll be the first comedian ever to show up to his roast pre-cooked. Comedy Central will have to change the name to 'Serving Leftovers at Bobby Henline's Reheating Special!'"



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