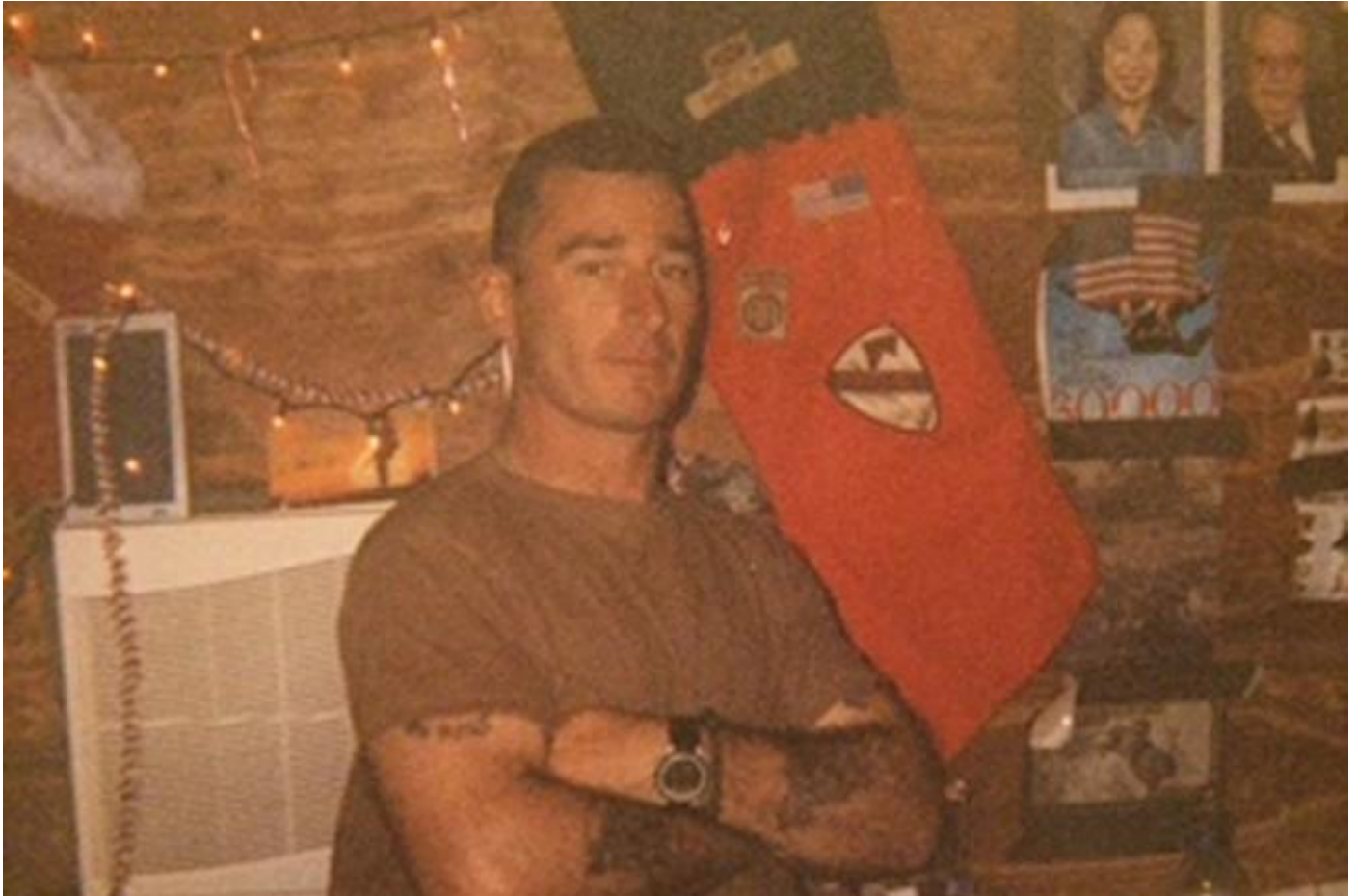


Former NCO Burned in IED Blast Wants to Open Restaurant, Empower Veterans

By Pablo Villa

March 28, 2016



Bobby Henline (COURTESY BOBBY HENLINE)

Former Staff Sgt. Bobby Henline has spent nearly nine years trying to empower wounded warriors such as himself. Now he wants to help employ them.

Henline is working to open a restaurant dedicated to hiring veterans in San Antonio, Texas. The location is not far from the medical facilities he frequents at Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston, where he has received treatment since 2007 for burns that cover nearly 40 percent of his body. Henline was burned in a roadside bomb blast in 2007 in Iraq that killed the four Soldiers he was riding with. Since then, he has undergone 46 surgeries and six months of rehabilitation. His likeness is permanently altered.

On his arduous road to recovery, Henline found comfort and strength in humor. He has enjoyed a newfound career as a stand-up comedian, telling his story on stage as a coping mechanism. Henline found that taking others along on his journey has helped other injured — and sometimes disfigured — Soldiers face their lives with the same exuberance. He hopes his new venture takes that notion a step forward.

“I’m trying to give back,” Henline told *People Magazine* earlier this month. “This is a great way to do it, through empowerment and food.”

Henline is partnering with Richard Brown, a Marine and Korean War veteran, who owns a hamburger restaurant in San Clemente, California. The restaurant is one of Henline’s favorite stops, not only because of the savory hamburgers but also because the two men share an interest in helping their fellow veterans.

Brown will teach Henline all he needs to know to run his own business. Henline will solely hire veterans to work at the restaurant.

“It’s not just me getting a restaurant,” Henline said. “It’s me learning to fish, it’s me teaching other veterans how to fish and to continue on to help the stability of other veterans not just myself.”

‘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,” Henline told *The NCO Journal* in 2014. “There are two things I remember. 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 found he was severely injured, but alive.



Bobby Henline (COURTESY BOBBY HENLINE)

Two weeks later, Henline emerged from a medically induced coma at Brooke Army Medical Center at San Antonio, thus beginning a medical odyssey filled with painful moments, both physical and emotional.

But one thing came easy to him — humor.

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 got to try stand-up comedy. You've got to try it!' I'm like 'That's stupid. It's not going to 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 and Robin Williams. 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. He returned to San Antonio 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 "Comedy Warriors: Healing Through Humor." 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.

Three years later, Henline is still healing. He wants to continue to help others do the same. He says one of the biggest driving forces behind him is the memory of his fellow Soldiers who didn't come home with him that fateful day.

"It's that same old thing, you've got to drive on," Henline said. "Survivor's guilt was really bad for me in the beginning. But you've got to 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've got to 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."