


Former NCO, Quadruple Amputee Inspires Others to 'Never Give Up. Never Quit.'

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NCO Journal staff report

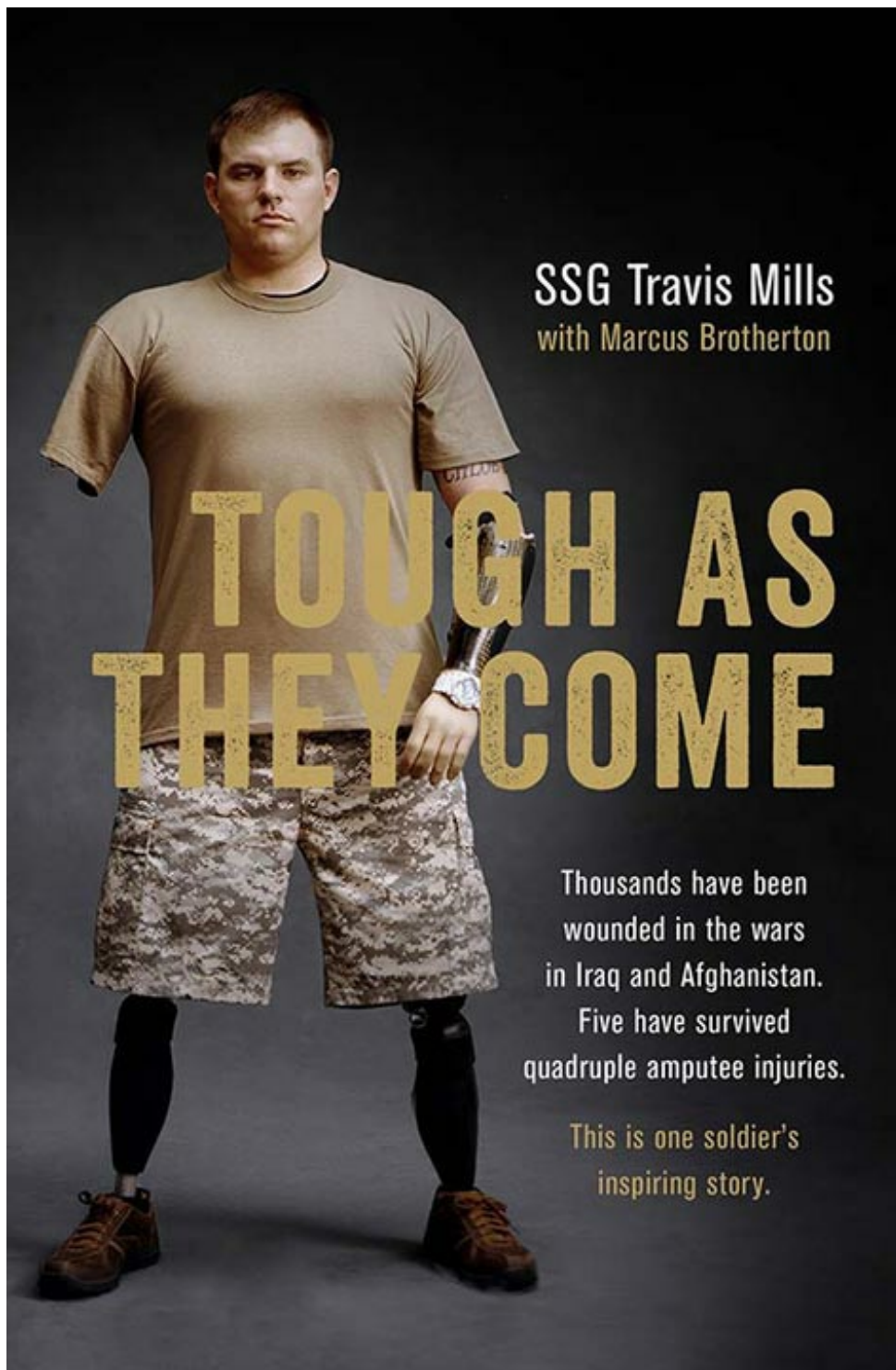
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Staff Sgt. Travis Mills didn't enjoy the pomp that most individuals revel in during the lead-up to their 25th birthday. Mills was weeks into his third deployment to Afghanistan as part of the 82nd Airborne Division of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, as his milestone date neared.

On April 10, 2012 — four days before turning 25 — Mills was on a routine patrol in Afghanistan's Ghanzi province when he stopped to set his backpack down. The bag detonated an improvised explosive device and changed Mills' life forever.

"I woke up for the first time on my 25th birthday to find out that I had no arms and legs anymore," Mills said last month in a video interview for NowThis News.



Mills is one of five surviving quadruple amputees from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. His story is told in the new book, *Tough As They Come*, released by Convergent Books on Oct. 27. Mills co-authored the book, available in hardcover, on Kindle and Audible, with Marcus Brotherton. It chronicles Mills' journey from being a high-school star athlete to suddenly being forced to reconcile with the fact that he no longer had arms or legs. Mills is also the subject of a documentary, "Travis: A Soldier's Story," released by Fotolanthropy in 2013.

A medic reached Mills moments after the blast and affixed tourniquets to his 6-foot-3 frame to keep him from bleeding out. Even under extreme duress, Mills could only think of others.

“I was yelling at him to get away from me,” Mills told the Associated Press. “I told him to leave me alone and go help my guys.

“And he told me: ‘With all due respect, Sgt. Mills, shut up. Let me do my job.’”

The medic saved Mills’ life. His limbs, however, were lost. Mills knew at that moment he faced a drastically different future. He would never again be able to lead his squad, hug his wife or pick up his infant daughter.

“I guess the last thing I said was, ‘My baby girl, am I ever going to see her again,’” Mills said in the documentary. “I was really worried about what life was going to be like afterward, you know, like with all this.”

Mills struggled during the painful and anxious early days of rehabilitation. He could do nothing for himself. He questioned his self-worth. He implored his wife to leave him so that she wouldn’t be burdened by his condition. His demeanor changed when his six-month-old daughter would crawl on his chest at the hospital.

“(She) didn’t realize anything was different about me,” Mills said. “So, at that moment I realized I had to make sure that I pushed forward and took care of my family like I was supposed to do. ... So, I just decided to take physical therapy and occupational therapy as a real job.”

The road was long and arduous — doctors at Walter Reed Army Medical Center told Mills his rehabilitation and transition to prosthetics would take three years. Through tremendous willpower Mills completed his rehab in 13 months. He said paperwork added four months to that period.

Today, Mills has focused on being a living embodiment of his personal motto, “Never give up. Never quit.” Referring to himself as a “recalibrated Soldier” rather than a wounded warrior, he can not only walk on prosthetic legs, he can run, drive, snowboard and ride downhill on a mountain bike. In 2014, he took part in a jump with the U.S. Army Golden Knights parachute team.

In tandem with the book he recently completed, Mills has also been building the Travis Mills Foundation, which he founded in September 2013. The nonprofit supports combat-wounded veterans and their families by developing and maintaining long-term programs that help wounded Soldiers overcome physical obstacles, strengthen their families and provide adaptive recreation.

“We try to bring in people that have been wounded overseas that are now recalibrated warriors,” Mills told NowThis. “They’re no longer wounded. But they might need help learning how to kayak, canoe, boat, swim, fish. Get, you know, their confidence back where they can go back out in public and do whatever they need to do. I want people in my situation to know that it’s OK the way you look, it’s OK to struggle. You’re going to fall down. Don’t be embarrassed about it. Just get out there and keep going at it.”

Mills currently lives in Manchester, Maine, with his wife, Kelsey, and daughter, Chloe, in a 4,000-square-foot house laden with technological amenities designed to help Mills with day-to-day activities. The home was a gift from a foundation established by actor Gary Sinise and the Stephen Siller Tunnel to Towers Foundation, a nonprofit named for a firefighter killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It is a comfortable setting for Mills to continue his work to help himself and others.

“I put personal friends in body bags. They’re not here. I am,” Mills told CNN last year. “How selfish would it be if I gave up?”