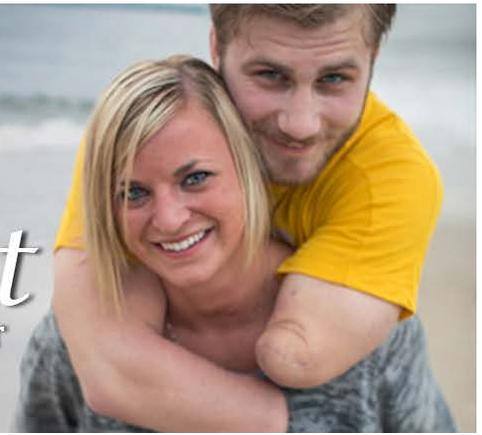


the *Fighting Spirit* of a Sailor



By Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Amara Timberlake

Taylor Morris joined the Navy in 2007 right out of high school. He checked out what all of the different services had to offer, but decided that the Navy's special warfare community was the path he would take.

"I wanted to do all the cool stuff that you saw in the movies and in the video games," said Morris. "I talked to a lot of the motivators and it just sounded like that was the right fit for me."

His high school sweetheart knew that it would take him away from her and their hometown in Cedar Falls, Iowa, but encouraged him every chance she got. While Kelly was earning her Bachelor's Degree at the University of Iowa, Morris was learning the basics about what it meant to be a Sailor and was getting his first taste of Navy special warfare.

Throughout their schooling, Morris and Kelly relied on long phone calls and short periodic visits to maintain their relationship.

"It worked out that we were each other's rock," said Kelly. "When he was having a bad day, it happened that I would be having a good day or vice versa, so we'd just lean on each other. Usually we'd like to look forward to the next time we'd see each other so we'd always have a countdown in our head and talk about what we planned to do when we saw each other so, no matter if you're having a good day or bad day that always brightens up a day."

The day after Kelly graduated from college she packed up her car and moved to Virginia Beach to be with Morris at his first duty station. After more than four years in a long distance relationship, the two were looking forward to spending more time together having a more typical relationship. She spent a little less than a year in Virginia before separation struck again. Now Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician 2nd Class Taylor Morris was leaving for Afghanistan.

Kelly wanted was for Morris to come back as the same person. The thought of him being wounded or injured never crossed her mind, but she knew post-traumatic stress was a reality for many service members returning from combat. Her biggest fear was that Morris would struggle emotionally when he returned. The two built their romantic relationship on a foundation of being best friends, and it was important to her Morris returned to her as the same man she grew to love.

That all changed May 3, 2012, when Morris stepped on an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan.

"I was up at the front clearing the way for the team," said Morris. "And they called me to the back to clear a path into the building...As I was doing that, my detector went right over top of something, but it never went off so I stepped on that. It was a pressure plate buried under the ground which set off an IED."

Morris remained conscious during the incident and clearly remembers being blown into the air. He remained so cognizant, that he continued to report to his EOD team leader the details of the procedures he was conducting at the time of detonation, as well as what other hazards persisted.

Kelly was on her way to work when she got the call from one of Morris' teammates that her boyfriend had been hurt.

"I immediately just wanted to be by his side," said Kelly.

As soon as Morris was wheels up on a plane from Germany to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., Kelly was on her way to meet him there.

Morris doesn't remember much until he began to wake up on the fourth floor at Walter Reed.

“Danielle basically lived in that room,” said Morris. “[She] slept on the little reclining chair that they had and then basically would just leave to go shower at a hotel and come back. She was there for pretty much everything.”

Morris was lucky. The fact he just survived was a feat in itself. He also didn’t show any symptoms of traumatic brain injury.

“It’s ironic now because he literally came back missing all of his limbs, but is exactly the same person he was before he left,” said Kelly.

Typically, once an amputee recovers enough to move on their own, patients begin physical therapy to start the process of regaining function of their lost limbs and working with prosthetics. Morris said it was encouraging to see people at Walter Reed with similar injuries walking and doing things for themselves.

“The therapists were really good about letting everyone go at their own pace,” said Morris. “But I wanted to take it as fast as we could. And there are things you’ve got to wait on, like anytime you have a surgery or get stitches, you can’t be in your [prosthetics] for three or four weeks.”

Morris said there was a standard template they followed to gauge the milestones he would reach and the timeline during his recovery. He was even able to skip some milestones he could do on his own without the therapy.

“The approach we took was very aggressive,” said Taylor. “But I’m happy because I feel like the results were just what I was looking for.”

Kelly remains by Morris’ side every step of the way and is pleasantly surprised with his progress.

“I always knew that when Taylor put his mind to something he could accomplish it, and he was always full steam ahead, but for this I didn’t know what to expect,” said Kelly. “I didn’t know I would get a phone call saying that Taylor lost all of his limbs, and six weeks later he would be up walking around on short legs.”

In August 2012, Morris was awarded the Bronze Star with Combat “V” for his actions that day in Afghanistan.

“If I had hands, I’d take this off and pin it on Danielle,” he said, after receiving the medal. “Because she’s helped me through everything,



Taylor Morris is assisted in physical therapy by his girlfriend Danielle Kelly and his physical therapist. Photo by Tim Dodd.

and it’s been so hard. She’s been there the whole time.”

These days, Morris is patiently awaiting his medical retirement. He and Kelly keep busy between medical appointments by taking college classes and traveling around the country to various speaking engagements and charity events.

Morris had his last set of medical appointments scheduled for Dec. 9, 2013. Finishing those appointments will put Morris and Kelly one step closer to starting a new chapter in their lives.

“We’re definitely looking forward to taking the next step, moving on to the next thing, and getting back to Iowa,” said Morris.

You can read this story in its entirety at www.AH.mil.