



# Trauma, Tragedy & Triumph

## *Blake's Heroic Journey*

Few people have endured what Blake has suffered through. Fewer still have found the strength and fortitude to keep moving forward the way that Blake has. This is his story.

Written by Larry Trivieri Jr.

Joseph "Blake" DeLoach, who is 30 years old, was born in a small rural town in South Carolina, not far from the U.S. Marine training base at Parris Island. From the time he was a young boy, Blake remembers having a deep love for the military. As a child, he dressed up in Army fatigues and playacted missions in his yard. "Even as a child I knew joining the military was what I was going to do," Blake recounts, "and as soon as I came of age I tried to enlist in the Marines."



But Blake's childhood was not all playacting and frolic. Far from it. When he was young, he and his older brother were abandoned by their unloving, alcoholic mother, leaving them in the sole care of his father. "I couldn't ask for a better father," Blake says. "He's still the reason I am what I am today. He provided for us and we never went without a meal, although sometimes dad did."

Because his father worked the graveyard shift, he needed to sleep during the day. Since Blake's brother was four years older than him, he was usually off spending time with his friends, leaving Blake mostly on his own. His feelings of isolation did not improve when Blake turned old enough to begin school. He didn't enjoy school and found it difficult. Because of the loneliness he felt, Blake began to use drugs. "I was twelve or thirteen when I started using cocaine," he admits. "That's what I turned to because I really didn't have anyone or anything else in my life at the time. There's really no answer for why I did what I did. That's just the way it played out."



Blake's life took another turn for the worse when his mother came back into his life demanding time with her children. As a result, Blake says, "I got shuffled around like a bag of potatoes. I went to six different schools and just got tired of it." Moreover, his difficulties with school did not improve. He was forced to repeat ninth grade three times because of his poor grades, and once he entered tenth grade and came of age, Blake chose to drop out of school. "I just wasn't good at school," he says. "I couldn't understand it. It just wasn't for me, so I dropped out."

In place of school, Blake found work through local temp agencies, biding his time until he could enlist in the military. During this time, using the money he earned, Blake paid for and passed a course to obtain his General Equivalency Degree (G.E.D.).

Then, as soon as he was old enough, he went to enlist in the Marines, only to be told a G.E.D. was not enough to be accepted into the Corps. Disheartened, Blake returned home. "I didn't even consider enlisting in the Army," he says. "I wanted to be a Marine."

Then fate intervened. That same night, Blake received a call from an Army staff sergeant who had obtained his name and number from the Marine recruiting office. Blake returned to the recruiting office at 11pm and spoke with the sergeant until one in the morning. The next day, after taking and passing his qualification tests, Blake signed his enlistment papers to join the Army. "My goal was to get a combat-oriented job so that I could serve my country," he says. "I didn't want to be a paper pusher or anything like that. I'm a people pusher." Based on his qualifications, Blake was offered positions in the infantry or as a cavalry combat scout in the 19th Delta. According to the U.S. Army's website, a "cavalry scout is responsible for being the eyes and ears of the commander during battle. They engage the enemy in the field, track and report their activity and direct the employment of weapon systems to their locations."

Blake asked for more information about the cavalry scout position, insisting on an honest answer. "I was told, 'Well, if you like hard work, long days, and getting dirty in the mud and so forth, you'll love the job.' I said, sign me up." Blake was then told about the Army's Airborne School, or Jump School. This interested him, so he signed up for that too."



It was during this time that Blake married his first wife, someone he'd known since sixth grade. One week later, he departed for six weeks of basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Soon thereafter, misfortune again struck Blake. "I arrived for basic training on March 22, 2005," Blake recalls. "By April second, my wife was already cheating on me with another man. That was a hard thing to go through, undergoing the hardest training of my life while learning my wife was cheating on me." Blake got through this by choosing to focus on his training in the hopes that his wife would "come around" by the time he completed it. That didn't happen. "I graduated jump school in September but she didn't show up for the ceremony."

Given two weeks leave before he had to report for duty for his next assignment in Anchorage, Alaska, Blake returned home to meet with his wife, only to find another shock awaiting him. She revealed that she was pregnant but did not know if the child was Blake's or that of the other man she had been seeing. Blake also learned that the other man was "a big drug dealer and drug user in the county."

Because Blake still genuinely cared for her he told her if she wanted to stay with him, he knew he could provide both her and the child a better life than the other man could. "So, I took her back and the baby, a boy, was born in January, 2006." (Years later, Blake learned that the child was not his, but he accepted him as his son and never stopped loving and supporting him.)

By then, Blake was stationed in Alaska, further pursuing his military training. There, despite his commitment to her and their child, his wife still continued to betray him, including writing multiple bad checks in his name that resulted in Blake nearly being arrested and having to undergo a criminal profile. "It was a big mess," Blake says, "but I stayed with her. Then I was deployed to Iraq, but before I left, I learned she was pregnant again."



In March, 2007, Blake was seriously injured for the first time while serving in Iraq. "I got blown up," he deadpans. "I was on patrol walking down a street in South Baghdad when an IED (improvised explosive device) blew up about ten feet in front of me." Despite suffering a shoulder injury and trauma to his brain, "I pushed through the mission, and then returned home later that month, in time for my second son to be born."

His respite home was short-lived, however. Two weeks later, Blake was back in Iraq "pushing through more missions" despite lingering problems with his shoulder. "Every time I would put on my gear, my arm would go numb," he says. Eventually, it was determined that because of his injury he was experiencing poor circulation in both his arm and shoulder. As a result, he was medevaced home in June of that year, where he underwent intensive therapy to rebuild his shoulder.

It was during this time that Blake first began to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They manifested when he found himself unable to be around his infant sons when they cried. Their cries were too much for him cope with because while in Iraq the opposition forces regularly played recordings of babies crying and screaming. The memories of that triggered Blake's response to his own children's cries. "I couldn't bear to be around them when they cried because it bothered me so deeply," he says.

Before much longer, Blake's enlistment in the Army was coming to an end, but because of his desire to continue to serve his country, he wanted to re-enlist. Meanwhile, his wife again got pregnant and his third son was born in February, 2008.

Blake re-enlisted so that he could continue to look out for his fellow Army colleagues and new recruits arriving in combat zones for the first time. "During my first tour of duty, none of us in my unit knew what to expect once we got to Iraq," Blake explains. "I re-enlisted specifically so that I could help my new unit better prepare for what they might face over there. We were a smooth, solid unit, just a good group of guys. I was glad to be with them because the military was my heart, but it was also hard for me because I was unable to spend much time with my children. I think I was only able to be with them on their birthdays twice during that time" due to how life is in the military.



Blake's next tour of duty was to Afghanistan. Two months into his deployment there he learned that his wife had taken his sons and once again left him for another man. In order to cope, he kept his focus on his mission "and keeping my guys safe."

When he was finally able to return home on leave, Blake learned that the new man his wife had left him for was someone he'd protected from being beaten up when they were both in school "because he was a small guy, other kids liked to pick on him." Before long, Blake and his wife divorced. Since then, she has refused to allow him to see his sons. "The last time I saw them, they were two, three, and four," Blake says. "They were so little."

When Blake returned to Afghanistan he was assigned to a personal security detachment detail, where he was responsible for protecting a high ranking officer. "But I didn't want to leave my unit," he says. "Those guys were like family." So, Blake did all he could to spend time with them while in Afghanistan. The prelude to the next major tragedy to strike Blake occurred on his birthday in October 2010. That day, he called his ex-wife hoping to be able to speak with his sons. She refused to let them come to the phone, telling him that she wanted him "to hurry up and get shot in the face and die" because she didn't want to have anything to do with him.

Three days later, October 18, 2010, Blake was assigned to accompany the officer he guarded to meet with local Afghani elders as part of a community outreach detail. But he soon discovered that the soldier assigned to replace him in his unit wasn't even awake, let alone dressed and ready to accompany them on their next mission. Knowing that his unit was already short of men due to some of them being away on leave, Blake asked for and was granted permission to instead accompany his unit in what was supposed to be "just a simple mission".

It wasn't.

Soon after Blake and his unit set off, after they passed the first checkpoint, they were ambushed. The vehicle Blake was in was hit by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) that landed inside it, where it exploded. "It broke my driver's arm, and did a lot of damage to my face and eyes," Blake recounts. "I lost my vision instantly and took a lot of shrapnel. My headset was completely blown off my head, my protective vests were destroyed, and so were my weapons. Basically, my entire crew was down."

Down, but not out. Despite being surrounded by dozens of enemy combatants, Blake says, "My guys, many of whom were also injured, swung into action, and we fought out of that tooth and nail, and sped back to the base."

En route, Blake's right lung collapsed. "A piece of metal had punctured my ribcage, shattering my fourth and fifth ribs and blowing bone fragments into my lung, so I couldn't breathe. I was also in severe pain, with wounds to the arteries in my neck. I was bleeding out and couldn't receive painkillers because they would have thinned my blood, and I would have bled out faster."



Blake also could not talk because part of his jaw had also been fragmented. "Every time I tried to say something, some of my teeth would fall out."

Despite his extensive, serious injuries, when his unit returned to base he refused help until he could assist his squad members out of the vehicle. Only then did he allow himself to be placed on a stretcher and taken inside for care.

Because of the severity of his life-threatening wounds, Blake was put into an induced coma, both to spare him from his pain, and in the hopes that he would somehow pull through. While in this unconscious state, Blake was visited by a general, who asked him if he was all right. "Apparently, when he asked me that, I was told that I gave him a thumbs up," Blake chuckles.

But Blake was far from all right. Days later, when he was finally brought out of his coma, his eyes were taped shut. He was told the doctors were unsure of his hearing, especially in his right ear, which had suffered the most damage from the grenade's explosion. Nor were the doctors sure how well he would ever talk again because Blake had lost fifteen percent of his jawbone structure, as well as eight teeth. He'd also had a bad reaction to the anesthesia he'd been administered, leaving him with limited mobility, along with serious muscle loss. "I couldn't even hold my head up," Blake says.

But the biggest blow came when Blake was told he had lost his vision. The attack had left Blake irreversibly blind in both eyes.

"The doctors asked me if they could do anything for me, and I asked to be alone for five minutes," Blake says. "For those five minutes, I cried as hard as I could. I let my injuries win for those five minutes, but that was all I gave to them. Then I turned my focus on recovering as much as I could."



Blake worked diligently and determinedly on his recovery. Each day, he made a bit more progress until, one month later, he walked out of the hospital. "I walked out of there under my own power," he says proudly, "holding onto my dad's shoulder. I carried myself out of that hospital. I did that. Nobody else did that."

Blake left the hospital in December 2010, and continued to undergo therapy in Augusta, Georgia. During that entire time, his ex-wife refused to allow him to see or even speak to his sons, something she continues to do to this day. It was a terrible blow to Blake, on top of everything else he was enduring, yet with the characteristic courage and determination that by now Blake was becoming known for, he persevered.

It was during his rehabilitation that Blake met Lauren, the woman he is now married to. Lauren was one of his instructors during his rehab therapy. "When we met I felt like I'd known her my whole life," Blake smiles. Lauren was the first person who Blake felt loved him for who he is. "I didn't know how to react to that at first," he admits. He and Lauren took things slow in the beginning, starting out as friends. Eventually, though, they started dating and that led to the happy and fulfilling marriage that Blake once doubted would ever be his.

When Blake and Lauren first met, he was on 26 different medications, most of which were narcotic drugs that Blake became addicted to. "I was self-medicating," he says. "Lauren met me at my worst, yet she still saw the best in me. I don't know how she did it, but she did, so I try every day to give a little bit more to her."

In January, 2014, Blake retired from the military after nearly nine years of service. The decision to do so was not his. Even with all of his injuries, Blake still desired to remain in the Army because he'd always wanted to spend his entire career serving his country, but because of his disabilities he was told he had to retire.



The news sent him into a downward spiral of depression. "I was in a bad place," he says. On one particularly low day, Blake "took a bunch of painkillers and alcohol" that caused him to have a seizure. Collapsing, he broke his back in six places. "I was so embarrassed by what I'd done that I lied to Lauren about what caused it," he says. "I didn't want her to think I was weak."

Blake continued to abuse painkillers on and off for another two years, but Lauren's love for him finally led to break free of his addiction in 2016. "I did it on my own," Blake says. "I went cold turkey, going through tremors, shakes, puking, all of that." This lasted for seven brutal days. Since that time, Blake has maintained his sobriety.

In his quest to continue to improve his health and maintain his sobriety, Blake began going to the gym to work out. He quickly discovered how much he loved doing so, especially lifting weights. As a result, Blake became a power lifter and now competes in competitions. "It's such an amazing feeling to know I'm sweating because I'm doing something good and healthy for myself," he enthuses.

The progress Blake has made as a power lifter is remarkable. In one competition, he squat-pressed 363 pounds and bench-pressed 297 pounds. In April of this year, Blake traveled to Boston, where, because of his achievements, he and Lauren were selected to receive a fully adapted house by Homes for our Troops. Blake still marvels over this because of the mindset that was instilled in him during his time in the military. "When you join the military," he explains, "the number one thing they tell you is you are not special, you're just a soldier, and that's it." Being considered special is something Blake still has not gotten used to, though the manner in which he's triumphed over all of the adversity he's endured certainly attests to the fact that he is.



This year, Blake also met his current, dentist, Dr. Marianna Kaufman. Since he was a child, Blake had always dreaded going to the dentist, but his experience with Dr. Kaufman has proven to be quite different. "She's amazing," Blake says. "She's gentle with me and you can recognize the intelligence she has just in her voice. I could go to the VA for free, full dental care, but I don't trust them."

Understanding Blake's anxiety about dentists, a common phobia of many dental patients, Dr. Kaufman introduced him to the NuCalm system that she employs in her practice. "NuCalm has helped me quite a lot," Blake says. "It's helped me undergo three cavity fillings, as well as cleanings and other procedures."



Because of everything Blake has endured and the determination he has shown in refusing to be defeated by it, Dr. Kaufman wanted to find some way of giving back to him. To that end, she contacted David Poole, Executive Vice President of Sales and Marketing of Solace Lifesciences, Inc, the company that manufactures and distributes the NuCalm system. Upon hearing Blake's story, David and Solace Lifesciences teamed up with Dr. Kaufman to gift Blake and Lauren with their very own NuCalm system. Given the experiences he's already had using NuCalm in Dr. Kaufman's office, Blake believes having his own system will be a big help for him as he maintains his sobriety.

Blake is brutally honest about his struggles with addiction. "I'm an addict and I will always be an addict," he says. "Anyone who says they were an addict is still in denial. Power lifting helps me stay sober, and now having Dr. Kaufman in my corner, and having NuCalm, the things that might make me want to use again are addressed through the NuCalm system. It keeps me calm. Before, I might choose a narcotic to do that, now I don't have to anymore. NuCalm helps me stay strong."

"If anyone deserves the gift of NuCalm, it's Blake," David Poole says. "He's given so much and served so many, and has received so little in return for his service and sacrifices. Our chief scientist specifically invented NuCalm for people like Blake to help them better cope and heal from addiction and PTSD. Both of those conditions keep the brain in a high state of stress. NuCalm relieves that stress and is the only system in the world to receive a United States patent because it does so."

Blake's love for his country and desire to serve it remains as strong as ever, and the example of his heroic journey continues to inspire others. "I told myself when I found out I was blind that I was not going to let blindness win," he says. "So, I'm pursuing things you don't normally see blind people do. I want to be a change agent for my fellow veterans and give back to them by my example. That's my goal."



To that end, since his injuries Blake has gone mountain climbing, surfing, and sailing. He's also shot put and thrown the discus at the Olympic training center, which led to him getting recruited for the Paralympics. "Just for the fun of it, I also got certified as a scuba diver down to 60 feet and now I go diving off the reef in Key West," Blake adds. "I've also taught myself music theory and I've taught myself how to play guitar." Blake also intends to set records as a power lifter.

When asked if he has any regrets, Blake immediately replies, "No. Because if I hadn't done what I did, I wouldn't be where I am now, which is a pretty awesome spot."

## Looking Forward

Even after triumphing over all of the tragedies and other challenges he has faced, Blake is not one to rest on his laurels. Instead, he continues to set new goals for himself while remaining focused on enjoying and appreciating the life he has created with his wife Lauren.

In October 2017 Blake set personal records for himself in his most recent weight-lifting competition. "I squatted 446 pounds, bench-pressed 303 pounds, and dead-lifted 491 pounds," he reports. "I'm hoping to squat 500 pounds very soon. My main goal right now is to get my numbers up high enough to where I can qualify to go to the nationals. If I can qualify, then I can get ranked nationally and possibly compete in the Arnold Classic and other major competitions."



Blake credits NuCalm with playing an important role in helping him achieve the personal best records he's already set. "When I received my own NuCalm unit it was a month before my last competition. I was really stressed out about that, but then I started to use NuCalm. I did it twice a day, five days a week. Then, when it came time for the meet, I didn't have any anxiety, which was completely shocking to me because I thought I would be debilitated. Before I started using NuCalm, every time I would go to do a squat I'd get so anxious I'd be shaking. Sometimes I would even throw up. It was not good. Ever since I've been NuCalming I don't have any anxiety anymore."

Because of the acute PTSD he developed due to his past tribulations, "I was flooded with paranoia," Blake says. "I couldn't eat without getting sick. I literally thought everything was going to make me sick." Because of NuCalm, Blake says he's been able to move beyond such feelings. "All of that has gone away or is so minute it's barely noticeable."



The lack of anxiety Blake has achieved as a result of using NuCalm regularly also enabled him to recently undergo an extensive dental procedure with Dr. Kaufman to replace the teeth he lost during combat. "There is no way I could have done that before I started using the NuCalm system," he says. "Because of NuCalm, I now have teeth that I hadn't had for eight years. That's a big transition."

"When I go to see Dr. Kaufman I take my headset and my iPod shuffle with me and I use her CES part of her NuCalm unit. I put the electrodes on and I put on the NuCalm audio tracks and I relax very deeply. NuCalm has made a big difference. I don't dread going to the dentist anymore."

Another significant benefit Blake has experienced since he began using NuCalm regularly is improved quality of sleep. "I can tell that my sleep is better when I use NuCalm compared to the times that I don't use it," he says. Even more importantly, Blake reports that NuCalm has changed the quality of his dreams, which previously could devolve into night terrors.

"For a long time, when I would dream everything would spin really, really badly. I looked that up and discovered that the interpretation of that sensation in dreams is because you feel that things in your life, the outside circumstances, are spinning outside of your control and the dreams are reflecting that. Since I got clean and started working with NuCalm with Dr. Kaufman and then on my own I don't have that spinning or anything like that in my dreams. It's very rare that I have any sort of night terror at all." Blake's dreams have also become more vivid. In them, he can see, and he often dreams he is telling people that he has his vision.

Lauren has also noticed the positive differences NuCalm has made for Blake. "She knows that NuCalm has made a world of difference for me," he says. "We both know that it's made a big difference in things in terms of anxiety alone, and just day-to-day-wise. I don't dread what the day might bring anymore, which is a big bonus."

Blake continues to use NuCalm five days a week. One Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays he uses it for an hour each day prior to going to the gym to train. "Depending on what else I have to do those days, I might also get another session in later," he says. "Then on Tuesdays and Thursdays I also fit it in. There are several audio tracks that I like that really calm me down. I alternate between them."

Based on his own experience with NuCalm and the important benefits it has helped him achieve, Blake would like to see it adopted for use by the military so other men and women who are putting their lives on the line in service to our country can also benefit from it. He particularly sees it being useful after combat missions. "With a combat unit it might not be your day to go outside the wire, but if all hell breaks loose then everyone's out doing their jobs," he says. "Then, when you come back, you don't get to leave what happened outside the wire. It sits on your shoulder until you deal with it. That's where I think this system, for sure, could help."

At the very least, Blake would like to see NuCalm made available as a mandatory part of R&R when military men and women are able to return stateside for a temporary respite from war. He foresees NuCalm units being made available through the USO hubs in the Atlanta and Dallas-Fort Worth airports that veterans fly into when they come home.

"The veterans could be given the option of signing out the units," Blake suggests. "They could be told, 'Hey, if you're feeling like you're overwhelmed, stop by the USO, sign out a unit, and take it with you on your R&R. Try to use it at least 25 to 30 minutes a day.' And at the end of their R&R, they would return the system and it could be reissued to another veteran coming home. I think that would be a good foundation block because unfortunately nothing can prepare you for what you might face when you are deployed to combat zones overseas. Within three or four months of being in Iraq I lost friends. It doesn't take long to have stuff just go wrong. I think NuCalm could help veterans deal with what they've seen and prepare them for what might come."

Asked what he would tell a returning veteran who is trying to assimilate back into civilian life about NuCalm, Blake says, "I would tell them, 'I know this might sound silly, but it works. At first you might think there is just no way that can be true, but after repeated use you will find that it does help.' I would also tell them that being in a third world country in a war zone takes a toll on you mentally no matter who you are, so if NuCalm is being offered, why not take advantage of a system that has scientific proof to help keep you from going down a bad path."

