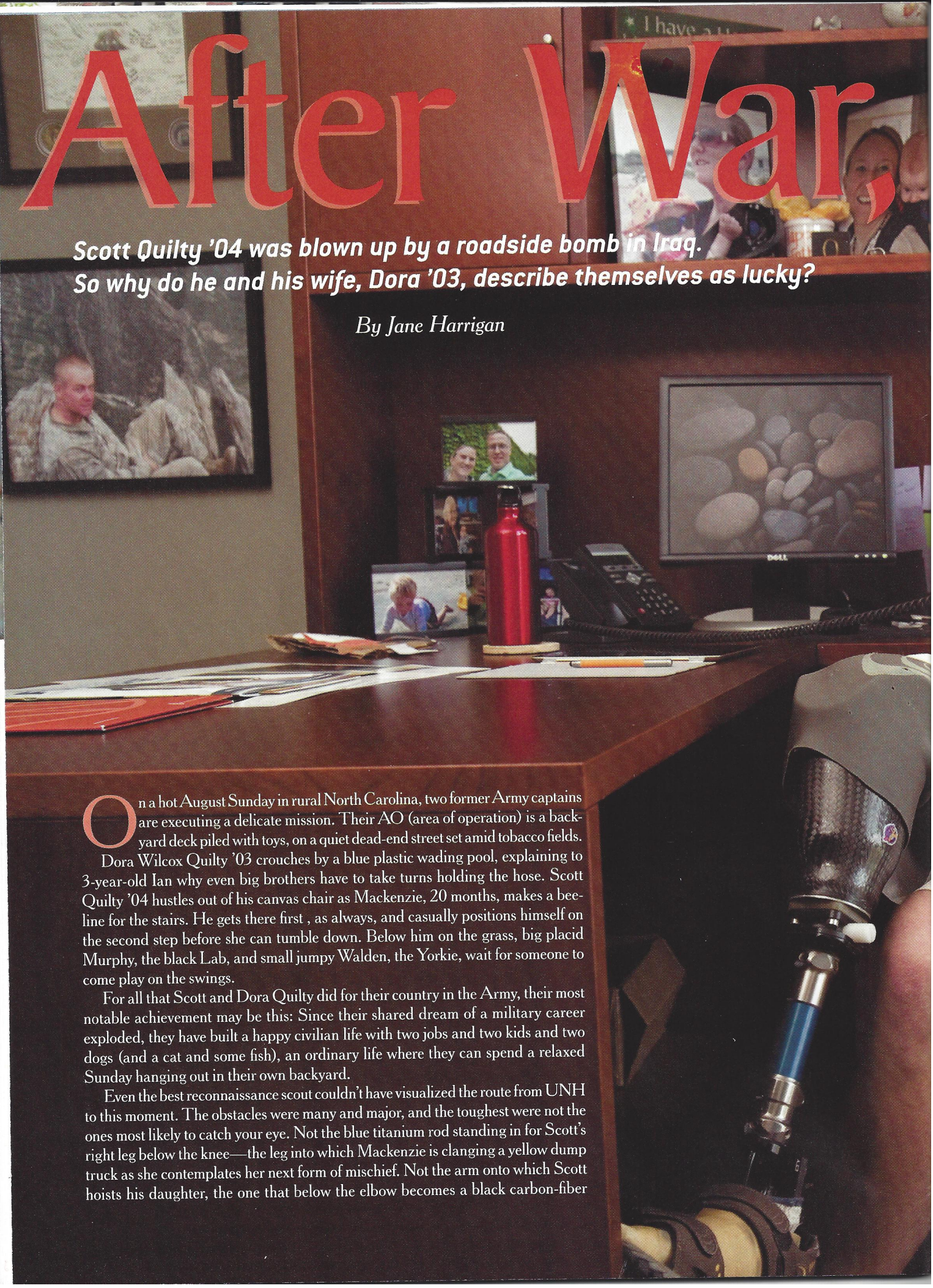
After War,

Scott Quilty '04 was blown up by a roadside bomb in Iraq. So why do he and his wife, Dora '03, describe themselves as lucky?

By Jane Harrigan



On a hot August Sunday in rural North Carolina, two former Army captains are executing a delicate mission. Their AO (area of operation) is a backyard deck piled with toys, on a quiet dead-end street set amid tobacco fields.

Dora Wilcox Quilty '03 crouches by a blue plastic wading pool, explaining to 3-year-old Ian why even big brothers have to take turns holding the hose. Scott Quilty '04 hustles out of his canvas chair as Mackenzie, 20 months, makes a beeline for the stairs. He gets there first , as always, and casually positions himself on the second step before she can tumble down. Below him on the grass, big placid Murphy, the black Lab, and small jumpy Walden, the Yorkie, wait for someone to come play on the swings.

For all that Scott and Dora Quilty did for their country in the Army, their most notable achievement may be this: Since their shared dream of a military career exploded, they have built a happy civilian life with two jobs and two kids and two dogs (and a cat and some fish), an ordinary life where they can spend a relaxed Sunday hanging out in their own backyard.

Even the best reconnaissance scout couldn't have visualized the route from UNH to this moment. The obstacles were many and major, and the toughest were not the ones most likely to catch your eye. Not the blue titanium rod standing in for Scott's right leg below the knee—the leg into which Mackenzie is clanging a yellow dump truck as she contemplates her next form of mischief. Not the arm onto which Scott hoists his daughter, the one that below the elbow becomes a black carbon-fiber

Life

HOME OFFICE: Scott Quilty '04 and his daughter, Mackenzie.

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sleeve and a hand that can do useful tricks when he remembers to charge the batteries.

Prosthetics are simply hardware, he says; learning to use them is just physics. The tough part is this: "When you get blown up, you lose your job."

When you get blown up. It's not a phrase Scott Quilty drops into conversations. He never wants to be the guy whose coworkers think, "Oh no, not another war story" every time he opens his mouth. But ask him about his time in Iraq, or the six years since, and the phrase creeps in. When you get blown up, life changes. When you get blown up, you replace the missing pieces and move on. He's a Ranger with a Purple Heart, Army through and through. But since an IED exploded his and Dora's plans, they have lived by the unofficial motto of the Marines: Adapt and overcome.

CONVALESCENCE: Scott '04 and Dora Wilcox Quilty '03 at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C., in 2006.

The 2.4 million Americans who have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have returned to face challenges as enormous as their numbers. Their unemployment rate, for years far higher than the rate for everyone else, finally edged down this summer—from much worse to merely equally bad. An estimated one veteran in five is dealing with a brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder, or both. One in four has filed for some kind of disability, creating a long backlog of claims. About once every half-hour, according to the Veterans Administration, a veteran attempts suicide.

The Quiltys have seen all those problems in people they served with, people with experiences much like their own. On no day since Scott got blown up have they neglected to take stock of how lucky they are; on no day have they forgotten less fortunate friends now gone. There are a million reasons any veteran's story can go bad, Scott says. He and Dora want people to know that even after a shattered body and shattered plans, a story can also go good.

DRESS UNIFORM: Married while Scott was in the hospital, the Quiltys celebrated later with family and friends.

Scott Quilty enlisted during his junior year of high school in New Hampshire. Serving seemed natural; most of the men in his family had done it. Two years into his commitment, having taken college courses part time, he was accepted to UNH as a sophomore on an ROTC scholarship. He would owe the Army three years after graduation, but he intended to stay for the full 20. As Scott left Fort Bragg, N.C., in 2001, his platoon sergeant gave him this advice: Don't marry the first girl you meet.

He married the second. Growing up in Virginia, Annmarie Wilcox—usually known by her middle name, Dora—had always wanted to join the Army, like her father (an Army Ranger) and every other male on his side "all the way back to Prussia." Dora had started at UNH two years before Scott. On his first day in Durham, as he was moving into an apartment with her ROTC friends, she came over to check him out.

Majoring in political science, Scott centered his life on ROTC; he found everything about the military endlessly fascinating. Dora, aiming for an Army career as an occupational therapist, rowed crew and deliberately sought out nonmilitary friends. But she was as eager to deploy as Scott was.

Dora graduated in 2003 and did her officer basic course in Texas; Scott graduated the following year and did his in Georgia. Dora went to Walter Reed Army Hospital for fieldwork and stayed on as a staff occupational therapist. Scott finished Ranger School at Fort Benning and became the executive officer of a basic training company. They got together whenever they could.

In 2005, Quilty and his good friend from ROTC, Ben Keating '04, met in Durham. Quilty was tired of his desk job, and he told Keating he was jealous: Keating was deploying to Afghanistan.

They were young and invincible. Over a beer at the Tin Palace, they spoke of their goals and barely mentioned their fears. Combat, in their mind's eye, looked like the Normandy landing scene in the movie "Saving Private Ryan." You know a lot of those anonymous people in the background are going to die—but not Tom Hanks, because the camera is on him. "We all think the camera's on us," Quilty says.

Mud huts. Water buffalo in courtyards. Garbage. Smells. "No electricity, no running water. No commerce, no industry, no nothing." Scott Quilty is describing what he saw when he arrived in Iraq in August 2006, a 26-year-old lieutenant leading a platoon of 42 that would be embedded with the Iraqi army. Their AO was a farming area southwest of Baghdad. It had acquired a sobering nickname: the Triangle of Death.

Platoon Sgt. Del Rodriguez had been in charge, without the usual lieutenant above him, when Quilty transferred to the 10th Mountain Division four months earlier. Most of the platoon had already served in Iraq, and they were leery of this new guy with no combat experience. "Clearly he was a smart kid," Rodriguez says. "He listened before he talked, unlike most lieutenants, and he figured things out."

COURTESY PHOTOS [2]

The more Quilty learned about Iraq, the more he thought, "No wonder they're shooting." He knew true bad guys were out there and needed to be killed. But the men they were picking up, the ones placing most of the IEDs—"abject poverty, no job, no teeth," he says. "If I was in that situation and somebody offered me $100 to place the wire, I'd be placing the wire."

At first, his duties as platoon leader weighed on him so heavily that he couldn't stop working. "If it wasn't going to directly contribute to taking everyone home, I didn't spend time on it," he says. Rodriguez and others warned him: Slow down. Get some sleep. Quilty tried to comply.

Six years later, sitting in his quiet home office, Quilty begins drawing as he talks about Iraq. He recalls good days and bad, and slowly the drawing becomes a storyboard of the worst day, Oct. 2, 2006. This is a condensed version of what happened, in his own words:

We were moving into an area we hadn't been to before. It was a much smaller village and we were going in with an Iraqi company and an American company, 120 people. We were going to search from house to house, looking for weapons or bad guys. It was our largest operation to this point.

The mission planning process was abbreviated. We didn't have room for an interpreter, just me and the radio operator and six Iraqis. We left around one in the morning, touched down, started to move into position. Quiet. Night vision. Nervous. Nothing about this mission was ideal. But that's what infantry does: We don't do the ideal; we do what's necessary.

I took point and I had Nathan [the radio operator] take the rear because I didn't know where we were going. Ordinarily you'd have someone junior take the front. But I'm not going to put someone in a position like that. I'll assume that risk myself.

We were moving through fields. Difficult walking, really muddy. Just tired. *Another squad had moved through this section right before us. We took a break as the sun was coming up. We were nearly into position.*

There was a small foot trail. When I went around a corner, there was an embankment, and I guess something was buried in it. It was probably meant for a vehicle. Somehow I triggered it. So I got blown up. Everyone rushed over, started rendering aid. There happened to be a physician's assistant who almost hadn't come on the mission. He happened to be friends with Dora. He was probably the best qualified person to be there at that moment to help me. They weren't going to land an aircraft because it was uncertain terrain.

Back at the base, Rodriguez heard Quilty's battle roster number come over the radio. "It was like a knife cutting right through me," he says. Rodriguez knew that Quilty had planned to make the Army his career, and he was expecting him to rocket quickly through the ranks. What, he wondered, would happen to those plans now?

Safe at home six years later, Quilty stops drawing. He looks out the window. In a separate conversation, Dora fills in a few blanks: Her friend the P.A. talked the pilot into landing. By the time Scott arrived at the hospital, all but five minutes of the "golden hour," the best opportunity to save him, had passed.

For Scott, "Memory starts five days later. I woke up in an aircraft, naked and on drugs."

Here are the reasons Scott Quilty considers himself lucky. He lost his right arm, but he's left-handed. He suffered no head injuries and no PTSD. Since the surgeries ended and the wounds healed and he got accustomed to the prosthetics, he's had no pain. His family was with him in the hospital. "And my biggest advantage," he says, "was Dora."

When Scott's Medevac arrived in Washington, Dora knew exactly what he was flying into. She'd spent a year and half as an occupational therapist at Walter Reed. She knew how to navigate the system, and she reassured his family: In a few months he'll be walking; in a year, he'll be able to run. "I could give them this image of somebody who's going to get better, not somebody who's broken," she says. That's the way she saw him, right from the moment she heard the news.

Scott's second day at Walter Reed, he asked his parents to leave the room. The Quiltys still enjoy reciting the dialogue that followed, laughing at how simultaneously romantic and unromantic it was.

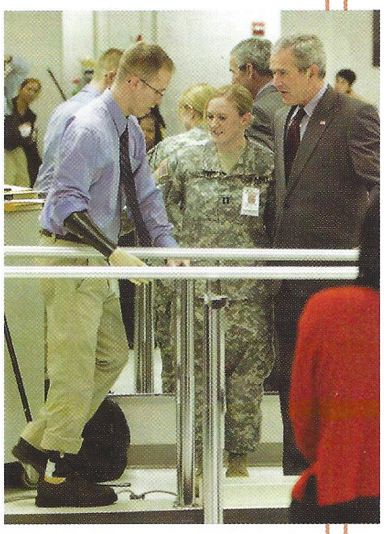
"We talked about this before I left," Scott said ("high as a kite on drugs," Dora adds now). "Do you remember?"

"Of course. I told you that no matter what happened, I could handle it."

"Do you still think that?" he asked. "Yes," she replied.

"Well, then, we should probably get married sooner rather than later."

They were married in the hospital on Veterans Day 2006—surprising family members who thought they were assembling for brunch. Though her parents had given their permission (something Scott still marvels at), no one had expected the wedding to come just five weeks after the explosion. In a year they'd have the big party with the white dress. For now, some food in the hospital's O.T. room would do as a reception.



AP PHOTO/GERALD HERBERT

PHYSICAL THERAPY: President George W. Bush and Dora watch as Scott demonstrates exercises at Walter Reed in 2007.

The next year brought big physical challenges and bigger mental ones. Six weeks after his arrival at Walter Reed, Scott and his mother moved into a nearby outpatient house as he continued daily therapy. Dora had to return to Fort Benning, where she was stationed. When she managed to transfer in February 2007, she and Scott rented an apartment in Maryland. He was still in a wheelchair. After their first dinner at home, she said, "I cooked; you clean." When he looked surprised, she said, "You can't put dishes in your lap and bring them to the sink? I think you can."

They had the normal newlywed adjustments to make, and then some. They didn't know how to think about the future; even if Scott stayed in the Army, he wouldn't have the kind of career he'd always envisioned. And Scott didn't want to think about the past. While he was in the hospital, Ben Keating had died in Afghanistan. "It was an overwhelming event in what became a string of overwhelming events," Scott says. More and more people he'd served with were arriving at Walter Reed, wounded. In survival mode, he'd turned inward; it would be months before he could face his feelings about Keating.

As he worked toward independence, Quilty struggled to set priorities. While Walter Reed encouraged amputees to participate in sports, he wanted to deal with the hole the IED had blown in his life. "I couldn't have cared less about running the Army Ten-Miler if there wasn't a *job* at the finish line," he says.

So while still an outpatient, he took an internship with the U.S. Agency for International Development, trying to figure out what a civilian career might look like. By summer 2007 he could walk farther and better; by fall he was driving. That Christmas, Dora gave him a rock-climbing harness. You're going to climb again, she said. Scott thanked her but thought, "No way."

CAPITOL STEPS: In 2009, Quilty speaks in favor of the GIVE Act, which created a Veterans Service Corps.

SURVIVOR CORPS PHOTO

On an average weekday morning, everyone in the Quilty house is up by 5:30. Dora has the kids out the door by 7, to drop them at day care on her way to work. She misses working directly with patients as an occupational therapist, but for now while the kids are young, a contract job for Medicaid fits their lives better.

By 8 a.m., Scott has settled into his home office. He is director of business development for Fathom Creative, a Web design firm in Washington, D.C. Twice a month he makes the five-hour drive there for two days of meetings. "I never miss more than two bedtimes," he says.

After the explosion, people told him, "You've given enough." He felt he still had more to give, and the Army wanted him to stay. But stay as what? He explored both civilian and military options, looking for a job he'd find satisfying as he and Dora puzzled over how future deployments would fit with the family they hoped to have.

Then Scott got involved with Survivor Corps, an international nonprofit that helped survivors of violence. It was starting a U.S. program for combat veterans, and he became program manager. He met with Congressional leaders, was interviewed on CNN, spoke on the Capitol steps. He'd found a new way to serve. His separation paperwork from the Army came through in 2008.

When Dora was posted to Fort Bragg, N.C., they bought a house. They'd agreed that Dora would try to stay in the Army long enough to deploy, because that was something she really wanted to do. But by the time her unit departed for Afghanistan, Mackenzie was a newborn and Ian was 2. So Dora, too, reluctantly left the Army.

Meanwhile, Survivor Corps had shut down and Quilty was debating his next move. His program had hired Fathom Creative to design its website, and he'd been fascinated by the process. He approached Fathom president Drew Mitchell with a proposition: Even though I live 200 miles from your office and don't know your industry, I could do a great job helping you find new clients. His confidence won Mitchell over.

"Scott is by far the most solution-oriented person I've ever met," Mitchell says. "His progress was fast and furious," learning software programs, connecting with clients, meeting and exceeding goals. Reinventing himself didn't scare Quilty; he'd done it as a nonprofit manager, as a platoon leader, and as a guy waking up to a new body.

Not every veteran is a Mensa member like Quilty, and maybe not every vet has

AT HOME: The Quiltys with daughter Mackenzie and son Ian.

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his knack for rallying the team to tackle tough challenges. But Mitchell, who hopes to hire more veterans, urges other employers to give them a chance. "If there is an aspect of your business that could benefit from unrelenting drive, focus and teamwork," he says, "taking a chance on a veteran is a no-brainer."

Back in the yard on that August Sunday, Quilty is talking about a bike race he just did with a group from work. Though he never thought he would, he has also returned to rock climbing. He demonstrates, using the child-sized climbing wall on the swingset. "In some ways it's better than a real leg," he says, moving his prosthetic into place. "Even when my left calf is burning, my right one never gets tired."

People see different things when they look at Quilty. Strangers in airports say, "Thank you for your service" and offer to buy him drinks. TSA agents search him extra thoroughly, then apologize. In business, when he's wearing a suit, nobody looks twice—until a new client wants to shake hands. If he goes to a store in shorts, "it's like Moses parting the Red Sea," he says. "Everybody looks." One day, wearing shorts and T-shirt at the gym, he watched a woman trying to keep her daughter from staring. "But Mommy," the little girl said loudly, "it's a *robot!*"

At home, nobody stares or cuts him a break. If Quilty gets up and starts making breakfast without attaching his arm, Mackenzie brings it to him with her version of a sentence: "Daddy arm." At 3, Ian is more aware of differences. On Quilty's desk sits an art project Ian brought home from church. "It's you, Daddy," he said. The paper-bag man has no right arm or leg.

Scott and Dora figure Ian will talk about the paper-bag man when he's ready. Recent years have built their reserves of patience and strength. When those falter, Dora looks at the blue cross tattooed above her ankle, a reminder that her faith supports her.

Scott relies on what he learned in the service, and the perspective he gained by leaving it. If a child is having a meltdown or a client is dissatisfied, he'll get caught up in it briefly. Then he'll mentally demote that worry to a lower rank in life's platoon of troubles. He looks to the wall near his desk, to a large framed photo of Ben Keating in the mountains of Afghanistan. Putting it there marked a milestone on his road from war to life.

Back in the rehab days, once he'd begun to feel steadier and to catch glimpses of a path ahead, Quilty went to Keating's hometown in Maine, to see his grave and visit his parents. He began to make peace with the ungraspable: He had survived, and Keating—"in so many ways, the best of us"—had not. Scott and Dora named their son for their friend: Ian Benjamin.

Even after they'd settled into the house, Scott didn't open the trunk containing his military mementoes. You can't lock it all away, Dora argued, and slowly he started to see what she meant. The Army shaped them. They're proud of their service and don't regret a moment of it, not even the worst moments.

So today as he works, Quilty can look around his office at a folded flag, a card signed by his platoon, and the picture of Keating. "I'm reminded by that picture what a privilege it is just to be here," he says. "I can't waste a single moment. Ben didn't get a chance at these moments, and it's disrespectful to his memory to do anything else but live." ~

Jane Harrigan was a UNH professor of journalism for 23 years and is now a freelance editor and writer. To post comments and view videos, visit www.unhmagazine.unh.edu/f12/quilty.html or scan the QR code at right.

From Service to School: Veterans at UNH

They've endured physical and mental trials most of us can't imagine. Many bear wounds or suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. But when armed services veterans come to UNH, what challenges them most?

Financial aid. Picking a major. Academic advising. That is, college itself.

The transition from military life to college is one of the biggest hurdles that veterans face, according to Lonn Sattler '87, '91G, UNH's veterans' coordinator. In addition, of the more than 400 veterans now at UNH, 150 have a physical disability and 100 are diagnosed with PTSD.

Sattler, who served in the Navy and Navy Reserve, provides counseling to veterans and manages their financial benefits. Since 2009, when the Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect, the number of veterans at UNH has doubled, and the educational benefits available to them have tripled, requiring Sattler and two colleagues to scramble to address their needs.

While the veterans' maturity, discipline, and experiences generally help them excel in the classroom and make them popular among (and sometimes mistaken for) their professors, those same distinctions get in the way when they try to connect with their traditional-age classmates. "It's weird being the oldest 'kid' in class," says Brendan Fagan '14, a forestry major and 16-year veteran of the Air Force.

At a recent brown-bag lunch, veterans discussed the importance of connecting with one another. "We all speak the same language, no matter what branch we were in," Fagan says.

Being isolated "ruins the whole college experience," adds Eric Allain '14, who is working to create a veterans network through a new UNH Student Veterans Organization.

This year, a pilot pre-orientation adventure program for incoming veterans, which draws on expertise from UNH's Northeast Passage, was launched. The two-day program introduces participants to services on campus and—via kayaking, camping and other activities at the Browne Center—to one another.

Challenges aside, the past decade has seen positive changes for student veterans, beyond the new GI Bill. PTSD is now recognized, although many suspect it remains underreported. And Americans honor veterans' service to their country. "Before 9/11, nobody would thank you for your service," Sattler says. "We haven't been appreciated like this since World War II."

—Beth Potier