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## THE WALKING WOUNDED: HORSES FOR HEROES

By Tim Hayes

Sergeant Francis Kirkson, United States Marine Corps, part Austrian, part Polish, part Norwegian. She was exactly five feet tall, weighed an even one hundred pounds, and had been born into a large family in Rochester, Minnesota. At home her friends called her Frannie.

Frannie got her first rifle when she was nine. Her father sent her out to kill squirrels and rabbits for dinner. She loved playing soldier. When she was twenty, she joined up. They shipped her to Parris Island, South Carolina, to learn how to kill people. She told her family she was proud to be accepted into what she called “America’s best fighting force.”

She worked hard to be the best soldier she could be. In basic training she did everything the men did, even forcing herself to shoulder a 250-pound marine trainee in a fireman’s carry and haul him more than fifty yards. It didn’t matter that she marched twenty miles the next day with multiple stress fractures in her back and legs. The proudest moment of her life was graduation, when she was handed her Marine Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. She said, “I truly felt I could help make a better world.”

Sergeant Kirkson was in Iraq for only eight months, but when

she came home she wasn’t the same person. She began working as a preschool teacher. She thought being with young children would be healing and bring her peace. It didn’t.

It didn’t matter that Fran had never needed to fire her weapon. She had still needed to step over men and women bleeding from unthinkable wounds and repair their radios. Sleeping meant night terrors. Horrific images of war would cause her to bolt upright, her eyes wide with fear. In an altered state, she’d immediately search her bedroom for an M16 that was never there.



Horses for Heroes. Photo courtesy of Hillary Schneider, Life Coach, Equine Guided Facilitator

She did everything to excess: work, exercise, dieting, physical therapy. She hoped it would build walls in her mind to help keep out the anxiety, the flashbacks and night terrors. Gradually she lost her connections with her family and friends. Anyone’s physical touch

was intolerable; her ability to trust anyone or anything had entirely ceased.

Sergeant Kirkson called people at the VA hospital. At the end of a four-hour evaluation, the doctor told her she was exhibiting severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

After almost two years of outpatient therapy, she still continued to shake whenever one of any number of benign sights or sounds triggered her PTSD. For Fran, trying to live a simple, ordinary life had become intolerable. Her therapist would later tell her that her recovery was beginning to seem hopeless when something unexpected happened: Fran Kirkson came face-to-face with a horse.

It happened by accident. On one of her weekly five-mile runs, Fran encountered two women on horseback coming toward her down the road. The riders had come from a nearby horse farm prophetically named High Hopes. Fran knew nothing about horses but had always loved the way they looked. She stopped running, slowly approached one of the riders, asked if she could touch her horse, and ever so gently put her hand on the horse’s neck.

Months later, she would tell her therapist that being close to the horse, smelling him, hearing him breathe, and feeling his soft yet powerful neck brought her a feeling of connectedness she had never known and couldn’t explain. She said it was the first time she ever remembered feeling “okay in my own skin.”

The natural ability of a horse to accept, without judgment, anyone, including a soldier who had seen or done horrific things and, by so doing, express compassion and benevolent acknowledgement was another extraordinary gift that horses were capable of giving to humans.

Fran began having a relationship with a horse named Rainbow in a program called *Horses For Heroes* at High Hopes Therapeutic Riding Inc. in eastern Connecticut. She said:

“One day, after about two weeks, I put out my hand and she touched it with her nose. Then she dropped her head low and let me gently rub her face and give her a kiss. I think it was the first time in my life I ever felt love, like her to me and me to her. I felt safe with her. I felt I mattered. I know this sounds weird, but when I looked in her eyes I felt like she knew who I was.

The hardest part of war isn’t being there, it’s the coming home. You’re not the same person. When I came home, I felt like everyone wanted something from me—my friends, my family. They wanted me to spend time with them; they wanted me to be happy. They wanted me to help them feel okay about me. They meant well, but they didn’t understand. I just wanted to be alone—that’s all I could handle.

War kills your sense of trust. I didn’t know if somebody wanted to be with me to make me feel good or to make themselves feel good. My horse Rainbow didn’t know me from before the war. All she knew was what she saw when we met. She didn’t want anything from me, didn’t expect anything. I didn’t have to talk about my feelings; I could just feel them, and she was okay with it. She opened me up. When I realized she had started to trust me, it was the first time since I had come home from the war that I felt like me, like I had gotten my old self back.”

Today there are many equine programs available to the thousands of veterans who suffer from the devastating wounds of war and specifically PTSD. The Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), working in conjunction with PATH Intl. Equine Services for Heroes, is a non-profit veterans’ service organization that offers a variety of programs, services, and events for wounded veterans of all military actions that

followed the events of September 11, 2001 (For information see: [pathintl.org/resources-education/path-intl-equine-services-for-heroes](http://pathintl.org/resources-education/path-intl-equine-services-for-heroes)).

As of August 2013, WWP has helped more than thirty-five thousand men and women find some program of help and recovery with more added every year. The WWP website states, “There are no dues here—those were paid by wearing the uniform and on the battlefield.” The organization’s motto is: “The greatest casualty is being forgotten.”

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This story is from my new book *RIDING HOME – The Power of Horses to Heal* and appears in Chapter 6, “The Walking Wounded—Horses For Heroes”. It is this amazing power of horses to heal and teach us about ourselves that is accessible to everyone and found in the pages this book.

To purchase or learn more about the book please visit: [www.riding-home.com](http://www.riding-home.com). Every book ordered will benefit veterans with PTSD, children with autism and children of families in need.

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Natural Horsemanship articles by Tim Hayes are at: [www.hayesisforhorses.com](http://www.hayesisforhorses.com)

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