

WOUNDED SOLDIERS

On the Road to Recovery, a Lift From the Sidewalks of New York

By JULIET MACUR

From the seat of his bright orange handcycle, Sgt. John Keith stared at the road ahead as he crossed the Queensboro Bridge, sure he could not go on.

Each time he pumped the crank with his thick arms, his biceps burned, his chest muscles tightened and his elbows ached. But just as he considered quitting the New York City Marathon after about 15 miles yesterday, a vivid memory popped into his head.

He remembered two friends who died in Iraq, men who were fellow Army medics in his First Cavalry Division unit. One died in a roadside bombing, the other in a vehicular accident.

"I reminded myself that I'm not doing this for me; I'm doing this in memory of the friends I lost," said Keith, 38, whose left leg was amputated above the knee after a rocket-propelled grenade hit his Humvee in Iraq almost a year ago. "So I told myself that I just couldn't stop, no matter how much it hurt, or if I bleed or even if I crash."

Then his eyes became teary. "I told myself, 'You will finish this because your friends won't ever be able to,'" he said.

So Keith, who is stocky and has a shaved head, gritted his teeth and pushed on, making it to the apex of the bridge before gliding toward Manhattan. He was one of about two dozen wounded soldiers who competed in the marathon with the Achilles Track Club, for people with all types of disabilities.

One Navy corpsman, Jose Ramos, 25, had his left arm torn off by a rocket in July 2004 near Falluja. He ran the marathon in 4 hours 57 minutes 35 seconds. Petty Officer Second Class Derrick Wallace, 22, lost his left leg in a motorcycle accident before his Navy unit deployed for Iraq. Using a handcycle, he finished in 3:28:31.

Also in the handcycle race was Sgt. Andrew Butterworth, who had been Keith's roommate at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. Butterworth, 26, lost his right leg after rocket-propelled grenades tore through his Bradley fighting vehicle last November in Tuz.

"It's so cool to be here with John, after we were laying next to each other in the hospital for so long," said Butterworth, who finished in 2:44:47. "It's kind of wild, actually."

To all of those soldiers, the marathon showed how far they had come since their injuries, and how far they could go. To some, just crossing the finish line was victory enough, no matter how long it took.

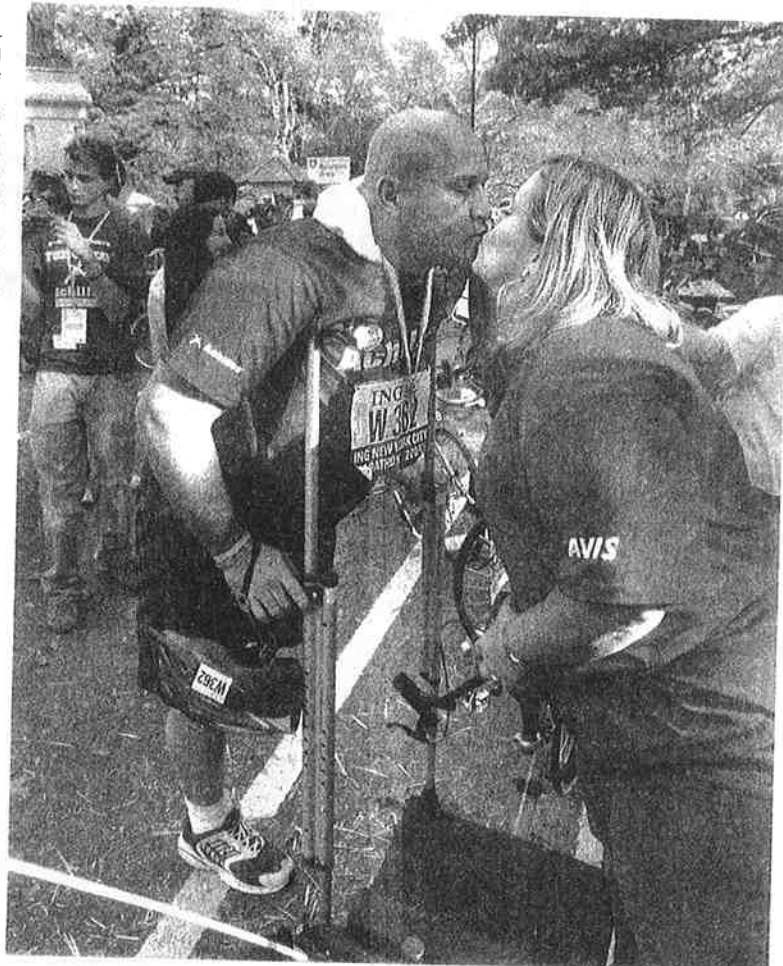
Keith, with a small orange flag bearing his name on the back of his bike, finished in 3:51:16, which was 73rd among 90 in the handcycle category. But to him, those numbers meant nothing.

"I never, ever in a million years thought I would do a marathon, so now I feel like I could do anything," said Keith, who played football in high school in Ridgeland, Miss., but was never much of a runner. "I really believe you've got to have goals when you're injured like this. I've seen people at the hospital who don't have goals, and they just sit there and slip away."

After the marathon, Keith and the soldiers from Walter Reed gathered in Central Park and congratulated one another, some still in their wheelchairs, others on crutches, a few on prosthetic legs. Keith quickly swallowed two Tylenol, examined the blisters on his hands and waited for his wife, Pam.

When she found him in the crowd, she hugged him and choked up while telling him how proud she was. "I'm so glad you finished, baby," she said.

Later, in a low voice so he could not hear, she said: "I'm much more glad that he came home to me from Iraq. I was afraid he wasn't



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

Army Sgt. John Keith, who lost his left leg after his Humvee was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade in Iraq, was greeted by his wife, Pam, after finishing the handcycle race.

going to make it."

While riding in a city bus toward the fog-covered Verrazano-Narrows Bridge before the start of the marathon, Keith said he had set three goals while rehabilitating at Walter Reed. The first was to get out of his wheelchair, which he did in April. The second was to move home with his wife and two children, which he did in June. The third was to finish the New York City Marathon.

This milestone was something special, he said, because he had completed it three days before the anniversary of his injury in Iraq.

On Nov. 9, 2004, Keith was on a patrol in southern Baghdad when a rocket-propelled grenade hit the door of his Humvee. The explosion caused his left leg to burst and seared his lungs.

Keith scrambled out of the vehicle, holding his leg because it was attached only by fatty tissue. He bandaged it and gave himself a shot of morphine before another medic arrived.

Keith was in an induced coma for about two weeks before waking up at Walter Reed, where he realized his leg might not be saved. Doctors fused it, but that left him unable to take a shower or climb into a car because the leg had limited range of motion.

After about a month, Keith opted to have the limb amputated, but only after talking to amputees at Walter Reed, who inspired him because they were so active. He saw that they could still run and ski and play sports.

Keith now uses a computerized prosthetic leg, which allows him to do the things he loves, like playing with his 5-year-old daughter, Alyssa, and his 2-year-old son, John Pearson, the way other fathers do.

"Who would have guessed that all of us would be marathoners now?" said Wallace, who raced with Keith until the Queensboro Bridge, then surged ahead. "We just proved that losing your leg isn't the end of the world."

Keith, who had been to New York City only once, said he planned to race in next year's marathon because the experience of hearing people cheer and racing through the different neighborhoods was addicting.

While rubbing his sore biceps and wincing, he said he could see racing in a marathon every year because the pain was worth it.

Until then, he will work in the acquisitions department at Fort Belvoir, Va., where he will stay for five years until he is eligible to retire from the Army. At night, he said, he will study for a college degree in business.

But at the finish, after giving it more thought, he realized he had yet another goal to reach before feeling fulfilled.

"I'd like to take my wife dancing," he said. "It would be country western, like the two-step."

He smiled sweetly.

"I promised her that seven months ago, and that's what I'm going to do," he said in his soft Southern accent.