

Iowa's Taylor Morris and Danielle Kelly On Life After the Bomb Blast: It Took His Limbs But Not His Spirit

When Taylor Morris, an explosives-detection and disposal expert with the U.S. Navy, stepped on a bomb in Afghanistan on May 3, his world changed forever.

By Alison Gowans

Cedar Falls, IA - Taylor Morris remembers the moment he no longer had legs or arms.

He remembers the explosion. He remembers flying and flipping through the air. He remembers landing, and realizing, with horrible certainty, that his limbs were gone. He could hear his team yelling his name. He remembers the pain.

The 23-year-old Navy petty officer had been using a metal detector to clear a path for his Army Special Forces team in Afghanistan on May 3, when he stepped on an IED, an improvised explosives device.

In the blast, Morris lost both legs at the knee, his left arm at the elbow and his right hand.

More than 2.4 million Americans have served in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of those combat veterans, 1,400 have had amputations. Morris is one of only five surviving quadruple amputees.

"My only thought was, 'When can I walk?' I just wanted to be able to put on my other leg and take a few steps."

Last week, just two months after his injuries, Morris was discharged from the hospital.

He is proving that for many of these wounded warriors, life goes on after devastating injuries. And that life at home is a new kind of battle, one to live not while overcoming enemy combatants, but rather fighting the scars and injuries those combatants left behind.

'I Couldn't Breathe'

When Morris's girlfriend, Danielle Kelly, heard the news, she said she screamed.

"I couldn't control my breathing, I was shaking uncontrollably and ended up throwing up. I kept trying to tell myself it's OK, it's going to be OK, but at that moment I knew everything wasn't OK," she wrote on the website CaringBridge.org. "Taylor and I planned so much, and none of this was part of the plan. All I could think was ... why did this happen? How can this be happening to us? What about our life that we planned?"

Morris was flown first to Kandahar, Afghanistan, then to Germany and, finally, on May 6, to the U.S., where his long recovery began at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

"I don't think a second of that day will ever fade from my memory," Kelly told Patch. "I try not to think back on that day, because it brings back all the raw feelings. Instead, we are looking forward."

Looking Forward

Morris, though officially discharged from Walter Reed, is still receiving treatment there. Last week he and Kelly, both of Cedar Falls, IA, moved into an apartment on the hospital complex. Morris is now designated an out-patient.



Taylor Morris in Washington, D.C., on one of his first trips out of the hospital after being badly injured in Afghanistan. Credit Tim Dodd

"I am feeling much, much better," he said. "I wouldn't say that anything has really changed in me or I have changed feelings about anything. Maybe I'm just getting more positive and realizing it is possible to have a better future than I originally thought."

Morris's friend, Tim Dodd, recently traveled to visit the wounded sailor. He shared his photo essay with Patch. The photos document physical therapy sessions, Morris's relationship with Kelly, and an inaugural trip on the D.C. metro for sightseeing, a big milestone.

"It was Taylor literally at the crossroads between patient and civilian," Dodd wrote in a blog post. "I loved seeing his face light up when we saw the Air and Space Museum's displays of rockets, or when we went through the art exhibits at the Hirshhorn Art Museum."



Taylor Morris works hard, with the help and support of his girlfriend Danielle Kelly, in physical therapy sessions at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Credit: Tim Dodd

Recovery

In previous wars, someone with Morris's level of injuries would almost certainly have died on the battlefield. Thanks, though, to the quick actions of his team, as well as advances in body armor, Morris came home.

And now that he's home, he isn't letting his injuries stop him from moving toward independence.

"We are just two typical 23-year-olds that had an idea of what the rest of our life was supposed to look like."

He sends texts on his iPhone to friends, using a stylus Velcroed to the stub of his arm. A fork can be similarly attached without assistance beyond his own teeth and determination. With a newly fitted prosthetic arm, he picks up and eats a brownie.

And advances in prosthetics are making things possible that even a few years ago were the stuff of science fiction.

Homegrown Advances

In Waterloo, IA, just a town away from where Morris grew up, a prosthetic company called Advanced Arms Dynamics is developing cutting edge technology.

The company recently unveiled "the Michaelangelo Hand," which has an operational opposable thumb, something new in the world of prosthetics. Their website is peppered with photos of amputees lifting weights, golfing and doing household tasks, all with the aid of prosthetics.

And don't forget South African runner Oscar Pistorius, who will run in the 2012 Olympics on his two prosthetic legs.

"It was nice to do things on my own again, like reaching something on the top shelf or opening the refrigerator without asking for someone to help," Morris said of using a prosthetic arm. "It was a little piece of independence."

The biggest step, literally, will be walking, which he still looks forward to with longing. That, at least, is some time away. He was able to briefly stand on one prosthetic leg, but his other leg is still recovering from a recent surgery.

He said standing on even that one leg was good - he was glad to be back at eye level with those around him. It was painful, he said, since it takes time to adjust to prosthetics, but mostly it just left him eager for the next step.

"My only thought was, 'when can I walk?'" he said. "I just wanted to be able to put on my other leg and take a few steps."

Just Two Typical 23-year-olds

Kelly said she is hopeful that before too long her sailor will be walking like a champion. She said Morris doesn't want to leave D.C., and the treatment and specialists available at Walter Reed, until he can walk perfectly.

"He wants to be able to throw on some jeans, walk down the street and have no one think twice about his legs or the gait of his walk," she said.

Kelly dropped everything to join Morris. She had recently started a real estate job in Iowa, which she left to move to D.C. Until the move to the apartment this week, she stayed in a hotel room next to the hospital, as did Morris's mother, Juli Morris.

"We are just two typical 23-year-olds that had an idea of what the rest of our life was supposed to look like," Kelly said. "On May 3 our life got turned upside down. (Now) we figure out a way to make sure we have everything that we dreamed about beforehand."

Legions of Support

Though far from home, the couple is far from alone, and they said that has helped sustain them through the harder days.

Nobody said it would be easy when he became part of Explosive Ordnance Disposal, Mobile Unit 12, out of Virginia Beach, VA, after stints in Coronado, CA, and Panama, FL, to name a few.

But this?

Back in their hometown of Cedar Falls, the community has rallied. Walk around town on any given day, and you will likely spot at least one person wearing a T-shirt or wristband in Morris's honor. Kelly said piles of letters and cards, many by school children, make their evenings a little brighter.



Friends and family visited Taylor Morris in Washington, D.C.

Credit: Courtesy Tim Dodd

"It is hard to believe all the support from everyone around us," she said. "We are honestly speechless when it comes the all the cards, care packages, donations, thoughts, prayers and visitors."

Donations have poured in from across the country. In Cedar Falls, numerous fundraisers have brought out the community. As a veteran, Morris's medical and prosthetics costs are fully covered, but there will be other costs for him and his family.

"We are still so young and have so much life ahead of us, we want it to be everything we have imagined, even before the accident."

When the website thehive.com published Morris's story and asked for donations to help him build his dream house, a cabin on a lake, readers chipped in over \$250,000 in two days. A group of Morris's friends set up a PayPal account to handle the donations.

Visions of the Future

Asked where they saw themselves 10 years from now, Kelly evoked the image of that cabin. She described living back in Iowa, with enough land for hiking and four wheeling. She hopes to have an established real estate company, and she's sure Morris will have also found a focus for his passions. She said kids are a possibility.

"We try to continue to work hard each day to ensure the best possible life," she said. "We are still so young and have so much life ahead of us, we want it to be everything we have imagined, even before the accident."

But for now, she's just focused on today, and taking that next step, tomorrow.

"It is hard to think far in the future, because we have been taking the last couple of months day by day," she said. "Plus, if there is one thing we have learned, it's that you can plan out life as much as you want, but life has a plan of its own. We are just along for the ride."