

Outlook is Everything

Marine Transplant Recipient Focuses On Small Victories Rather Than Setbacks



After nearly two years on the transplant list, retired Marine Sgt John Peck raises one of his new arms following his surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Mass., in 2016.

JESSICA PECK

By Sara W. Bock

John Peck opened the cover of his new memoir, “Rebuilding Sergeant Peck: How I Put Body and Soul Together After Afghanistan,” and carefully signed his name on the first page. He then worked his way through a stack of the books and signed one after the other, taking the time to pen a personal note to each recipient.

The book’s release date finally had arrived, and sitting in his wheelchair in front of his computer at his home in Bethesda, Md., May 7, he logged on to his Facebook account and started a live video feed, sharing the excitement of the occasion with the more than 17,000 people who follow his “John Peck’s Journey” page.

Signing books may sound like an unremarkable task, but for him, it’s the opposite of mundane—it’s extraordinary. The hands he uses to hold the pen and steady the book are not the hands he was born with, nor are they part of prosthetic limbs. John’s arms once belonged to another young man—an organ donor—and became part of his body in the fall of 2016 when he became the second U.S. military servicemember in history to undergo a bilateral arm transplant.

I began corresponding with John last August about sharing his story with *Leatherneck*. At the time, he was two years post-transplant. His book—which he co-wrote with author Dava Guerin and Pulitzer Prize-nominee and journalist Terry Bivens—was nearing the final stages of publication, and he was beginning to scale back the number of hours he was spending in various therapies at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Bethesda, Md., which previously had amounted to the equivalent of a full-time job.

We scheduled a visit in Bethesda during the first week of November, where I would observe his occupational therapy session at the hospital and visit the nearby apartment where John lives with his wife, Jessica, to see the outcome of two years of rehabilitation and therapy as he goes about the activities of his daily life. I booked a flight from my home in Yuma, Ariz., where I work remotely for *Leatherneck*, to Washington, D.C., and waited eagerly to meet the optimistic, witty Marine who left Afghanistan without his limbs but refused to leave his spirit there too.

But just as I began to pack my bag to head east, I got some unfortunate news: John was headed to Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, Mass., the same

hospital in which he had undergone the arm transplant. What first had appeared as a small rash on one of his arms had escalated, and his body was displaying symptoms of rejection—every organ recipient’s worst nightmare. Despite the anti-rejection medications he had been taking, his immune system was recognizing his arms as foreign objects and had begun attacking them. It wasn’t the first time it had happened, and there is no guarantee it will be the last.

After talking on the phone with the public affairs specialist who was my contact at Walter Reed Bethesda, I promptly called the airline to cancel my flight.

John’s condition improved with treatment, though the rejection symptoms didn’t clear up completely, and he returned home to Bethesda. We agreed to postpone our meeting until spring.

It was early in the morning on April 2 when I arrived at Walter Reed Bethesda to meet John. After parking, I quickly checked my email on my phone and found one new message from him. He was not headed to his occupational therapy session as planned, but to the emergency room with a high fever and severe abdominal pain. He would soon find out that his appendix had ruptured and the resultant bacteria caused an abscess to form. The doctors, however, would have to delay



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

After returning from Afghanistan a quadruple amputee, Peck donned his dress blues to attend the Army-Navy football game in 2013.

the removal of the abscess due to his low white blood cell count, a side effect of his transplant-related medications. He had just recovered from a severe bacterial infection in his mouth, which also could be traced back to the medications, and now was facing yet another life-threatening scenario.

While I was unable to meet him in person that day, I spent the morning with the occupational and physical therapists at Walter Reed Bethesda. They’ve spent



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

Peck signs copies of his new book, “Rebuilding Sergeant Peck: How I Put Body and Soul Together After Afghanistan,” at his home in Bethesda, Md., May 7. The book, which he co-wrote with Dava Guerin and Terry Bivens, details his life journey from a difficult childhood all the way to becoming the second U.S. servicemember ever to receive an arm transplant.



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

Peck and other members of 3/1 stopped to take this photo in Iraq in 2007. During that deployment, he was injured by an IED and suffered a TBI, which wiped out much of his memory. Three years later, he would step on a second IED in Afghanistan, which left him a quadruple amputee.

so much time with John that they've become an unlikely "family" of sorts, and each describes him as motivated and goal-oriented, particularly when it comes to his passion for cooking. Laughing as they describe the "pickle Oreo ice cream sandwiches" he concocted during one of his therapy sessions, they say that working toward various kitchen tasks like

chopping and stirring has pushed him to make remarkable progress.

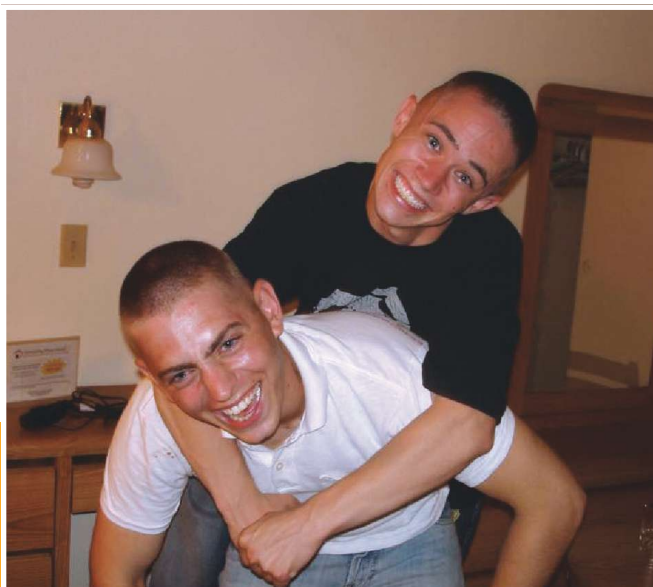
Now, three years have passed since the transplant, and although he's made great strides in terms of function, mobility and strength, John continues to face setbacks and challenges—as evidenced by our two canceled meetings—and he likely always will.

"I'm hard to kill!" he jokingly said to me, flashing a big smile as we video chatted on our computers via Skype on April 23. He finally was home from the hospital, and while still not 100 percent, he was feeling well enough to proceed with the interview despite the fact that he had to cancel several stops on his long-anticipated book tour as he continued to recover.

A quadruple amputee, Peck, then a corporal, lost all four of his limbs after stepping on an improvised explosive device (IED) during a routine patrol in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in 2010, while serving as an infantry squad leader with 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. It wasn't his first IED-related injury in combat. An IED blast in Al Anbar Province, Iraq, in 2007, left him with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) that caused significant memory loss and speech-related issues, yet didn't deter him from reenlisting in the Marine Corps two years later in 2009.

"I loved the camaraderie, the brotherhood, and I loved my job," he said of life as a grunt.

As he recalls the events of May 24, 2010—the day his life changed forever—he doesn't spare me any of the more gruesome details. He immediately lost



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

Peck, bottom, and fellow Marine Nathan Tapp goof around in Guam in 2007 before deploying to Iraq with 3/1. The two have kept in touch over the years, and Tapp recently visited Peck in Bethesda.

his left leg below the knee, his right leg above the knee and his right arm above the elbow. His left arm, which later would be amputated, experienced “degloving,” separating his skin from the underlying tissue.

“This is my dark, sick, twisted sense of humor, but when I stepped on the IED I felt something hit me in my head and I swear to this day it was my foot kicking me in the head,” Peck recalled, saying that he thought to himself, “Way to go, John, you found another IED, you’re really good at this.”

Dust and soot filled his eyes, preventing him from fully taking in the severity of his injuries, but the situation was dire. The corpsmen applied tourniquets, and, since his limbs had been ripped from his body, had no choice but to insert an IV through the marrow of an exposed bone in his left leg.

As he screamed and pleaded with the Marines and corpsmen who surrounded him not to let him die, he felt the rotor wash of the casualty evacuation helicopter overhead.

“The last thing I remember was being put on the helicopter and seeing a dark figure above me, and I tried to look back and tell the guys I’d be back in a few days, and the next thing I know I’m probably getting a high dose of morphine,” said Peck. He was transported to Bagram Air Base in eastern Afghanistan, and then to Germany. During the flights, medical personnel worked hard to keep him alive



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

Prior to his arm transplant surgery, Peck spoke to students at a school in Washington, D.C., about his experiences in the Marine Corps. After hearing him share his story, the students donated the proceeds of their bake sale and car wash to his arm transplant fund.

as he “coded” numerous times and nearly was pronounced dead.

Medically sedated, he didn’t wake up for roughly three months. Upon his arrival at National Naval Medical Center, which in 2011 would merge with Walter Reed Army Medical Center and take on its current name, his doctors decided his only remaining limb—the left arm—had been so badly damaged that it would have to be amputated.

“Losing all four of my limbs wasn’t the biggest thing I was facing, believe it or not,” Peck tells me. He had contracted a flesh-eating fungus that nearly claimed his life, eating away at what little remained of his limbs and forcing doctors to remove

even more of his left leg all the way to his hip socket. The situation was so dire that they began to discuss end-of-life decisions with his family members.

But again, Peck defied the odds, pulled through and began to recover. Only one of his limbs—his left arm—could successfully be fitted for a prosthetic device, which greatly limited his ability to regain skills related to self-care and independence.

As optimistic and cheerful as he comes across today, he doesn’t shy away from speaking candidly about what he calls the “dark spot” he once found himself in.

“At that point in my life, my life sucked,” said Peck, describing his particularly



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

Peck and Ken Jones, founder of Warfighter Engaged, a company that builds adaptive video game controllers for amputees, at Walter Reed Bethesda, in 2012.



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

After his arm transplant, Peck, left, and his friend, Tony McDermott, took in the scenery on an Alaskan cruise in 2017.



COURTESY OF WRNMMC

Kyla Dunlavey, Peck's first physical therapist at Walter Reed Bethesda, adjusts his arm splints in 2017. After spending six months in Boston post-surgery, Peck returned to Bethesda early in 2017 to continue his rehabilitation and therapy.

toxic first marriage, which came to an end during his recovery process and made matters worse. Unsure of how to go forward in his current state, he came up with a plan to maneuver his wheelchair down a hospital stairwell, which he hoped would end his life.

There were a few factors that ultimately prevented him from following through with that plan, one of which was a scene he witnessed as he looked out the window of his hospital room: another amputee sitting in his wheelchair on the side of the road.

"It looked like he was going to throw himself into traffic," Peck said. "Then all of a sudden this little girl comes up behind

him and grabs his hand, and then the wife or girlfriend comes up and grabs his other hand, and I thought to myself, 'Wait a second. If he can find love or happiness, so can I ... it's not the end of the world.'"

In that moment, which he details in the introduction of his book, he found the determination to survive the most desperate of circumstances. With conviction, he tells his readers: "If I can find that will, you can too."

This message is one of the main reasons why Peck—who dislikes attention and is uncomfortable in the spotlight—says he decided to share his story with the world. It's his hope that his experiences might

impact anyone who has lost the will to live, or help provide some perspective on their own personal situations.

"If it helps one person, that's all I care about," he said.

He also hopes that "Rebuilding Sergeant Peck" will raise awareness for a cause that has changed the course of his life: organ donation.

In 2013, Peck heard about a man in Spain who had received a leg transplant. He began to research the topic of limb transplants and stumbled upon Brigham and Women's Hospital, which is home to an arm and hand transplant team. Early in 2014, he visited Boston, where he underwent medical and psychological testing to determine if he was a candidate for the experimental procedure.

There were no guarantees that the surgery would be successful, or that his body would accept the new arms.

"I knew going into the arm transplant and going into the therapy that it wasn't going to be just 'attach the arms and you're done.' It's extensive therapy and rehab once the arms are attached," Peck said.

There also was the risk of infection; the need for subsequent "debulking" procedures and the realization that things would get worse before they got better: He essentially would be entirely dependent on others for basic tasks while he slowly learned to use his new arms.

The surgery also would require him to move out of his adaptive smart home in Fredericksburg, Va., which had been donated to him by the Gary Sinise Foundation and nonprofit organization Tunnel to Towers, to move to Walter Reed Bethesda to continue his rehabilitation and therapy after spending six months in Boston.

Despite the uncertainty that came with the transplant, Peck was committed to taking the leap. As he waited for a donor match, he met and began dating the woman who became his wife, Jessica, whose love, care and support he says have gotten him through even the hardest of days. In August 2016, when the call finally came, she dropped everything to go with him to Boston and become his caregiver.

The transplant surgery on Aug. 19, 2016, was a painstaking 14-hour process involving attaching screws and stainless steel plates to bones; connecting blood vessels; joining nerves and adjusting skin. When Peck woke up, his arms were whole again.

Unbeknownst to him, a Brigham and Women's Hospital press conference would wind up connecting him with the donor's father, who previously had opted for his deceased son's donation to be anonymous. Prior to the press conference, Peck had requested that the hospital place an empty

chair next to him in memory of his donor, in keeping with the military tradition of honoring the fallen. After seeing the gesture, the donor's father contacted him and told him about his son, a young, musically-inclined man about Peck's age who died from a rare brain disease.

"He saved four people's lives, but he improved countless others, including mine," Peck said of his donor.

More than four months after the transplant, on Dec. 28, 2016, Peck wiggled his fingers for the first time. It was his first "small victory," and one of the many he chronicled through videos and photos he shared on his Facebook page, inviting the world to follow along with an incredible journey that's been anything but easy, but that he says has been worth it all.

He talks about his first push-ups and pull-ups using his new arms; making a sandwich for the first time; the Valentine's Day dinner he cooked for Jessica last year; a solo trip to the grocery store below his apartment to buy frozen waffles; throwing the first pitch at a baseball game in June 2018 and learning to drive an adaptive van. He laughs as he says he now owes Jessica two years as her "designated driver." It's evident as he talks about these moments that these are the things that truly rebuilt



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

Peck and his wife, Jessica, celebrate his second time sitting in a chair after his transplant surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston on Aug. 25, 2016.



COURTESY OF SGT JOHN PECK, USMC (RET)

Peck, an avid cook and aspiring professional chef, had the opportunity to meet *Food Network* stars Bobby Flay, right, and Katie Lee, left, at the New York Food and Wine Festival in 2018. During his visit, he also met Giada De Laurentis and the judges from the reality cooking game show "Chopped."



COURTESY OF WRNMMC

After receiving two new arms, Peck spent a great deal of time in the therapy kitchen at Walter Reed Bethesda, working hard to independently enjoy his favorite pastime. His therapists say that they used his passion for cooking to help motivate him to make progress in mobility and function.

ently motivate him to hit milestone goals like using a knife. With a variety of adaptive tools, such as a splint with a knife attachment, and then a “rocker knife” that allows the user to cut using a rocking motion rather than the typical sawing motion, he worked his way up to having the strength and dexterity to use a real knife.

As only the second arm transplant patient ever to receive therapy at Walter Reed Bethesda, Peck has provided somewhat of a learning experience for the staff, who are uniquely positioned for collaboration among different specialties through the facility’s integrated, holistic approach to wounded warrior care. In the Military Advanced Training Center (MATC), located on the first floor of the America Building at Walter Reed Bethesda, physical therapists, occupational therapists, prosthetists and providers from various other specialties are all found in the same area, and regularly work together to provide each patient with the best possible care for their individual case.

“It’s different with arm transplants

him and helped him feel whole again.

If the skilled surgeons who attached his new arms gave him wings, it was his team of providers at Walter Reed Bethesda who taught him how to fly.

Often using Peck’s lifelong love for cooking as a motivator, his physical and occupational therapists have helped him set and achieve goals for himself. Raised by a single mother, 12-year-old John was left largely to fend for himself, and he often improvised and experimented with

different ingredients after growing tired of eating the same things over and over. He’s enjoyed being in the kitchen ever since, and dreams of perhaps becoming a professional chef one day.

“The fun part of my job is being able to take the person’s interests and really tailor it to their goals and their needs,” said Annemarie Orr, an occupational therapist who worked with John after his surgery until the fall of 2018, adding that she watched his desire to cook independ-



NANCY S. LIGHTMAN

Brook Walker, an occupational therapy assistant at Walter Reed Bethesda, demonstrates hand exercises during an interview with *Leatherneck*, April 2.



COURTESY OF WRNMMC

Peck works to improve his grip strength using a rubber therapy tool held by occupational therapist Mark Marsico at Walter Reed Bethesda.

obviously, so you don't really know what to expect—it's not textbook, and that was where it was a little bit tricky, but it's also a fun part of the creative piece because every day was kind of new and different," said Orr. "John is far surpassing expectations in a lot of ways, and that is 100 percent a tribute to who he is as an individual and a Marine."

Ongoing communication between John's teams at Walter Reed Bethesda and Brigham and Women's has been a vitally important element throughout the entire process. Steve Springer, John's case coordinator in Bethesda, serves as a liaison between the two and has advocated for him throughout the process.

Alyssa Olsen, a physical therapist assistant at Walter Reed Bethesda, emphasized the amount of arm strength John gained since he began his therapy there in January 2017.

"He's incredible," she said. "He would give me a hard time for some of the 'creative' tasks that I gave him, but he did them. He did anything I asked him to do. I had my days where I'd try and break John—push him to the limit and see what I could get out of him—and it was fun."

His physical therapy focused on motor control, utilizing different muscle groups, improving stability, and included various exercises and activities like swimming in a therapy pool to improve core control, doing bicep and tricep curls and eventually even push-ups and pull-ups.

"I have learned so much on so many different levels just from working with him," said Olsen. "He's honestly one of my favorite patients I've ever had."

For a while, therapy took up his entire day, five days a week. Today, Peck leaves his apartment on therapy days, just two days a week, and takes himself on a 15-minute wheelchair ride to Walter Reed to see his occupational therapists, Brook Walker and Mark Marsico. He stopped doing physical therapy last summer, and now focuses his energy on strengthening and fine-tuning the motions of his hands using various therapy tools like putty, rubber bands and clips as he continues to improve his ability to perform daily tasks. They work with him to set goals based on what he wants to accomplish in his everyday life. According to Walker, the progress has been slow but sure.

"He's a very goal-oriented person, and we've always fostered his goals and tried to simulate those activities in our environment here," said Walker. "So, lots of cooking tasks. He would come up with a recipe that he wanted to make that particular day, and we would go through the whole process."

There's a door adjacent to the main occupational therapy area that leads to



JESSICA PECK

Wearing his "Chef Peck" jacket, Peck gets ready to prepare a Valentine's Day dinner for his wife, Jessica, at Walter Reed Bethesda in February 2018.

a kitchen, where John and his therapists have spent countless hours working on his cooking skills.

"You can definitely see when he achieves something, he wants to show it off," said Marsico. "He wants to share what he cooks with people. He wants to be independent."

In the years since he's been injured, Peck has not only longed for independence but also has looked for ways to help others. Each year during the holidays, he's found single moms in the local community and purchased gifts for their children. In 2017, he and Jessica filled two shopping carts with toys and delivered them to a family shelter on Christmas Eve.

"My outlook has changed dramatically. I'm more caring, more empathetic—definitely look out for people who are struggling and try to help them," he said. "You've got to have a positive outlook."

It's his hope that "Rebuilding Sergeant Peck" will serve as another way in which he can reach out to people who need help. It's a refreshingly open and honest narrative that details his journey from a difficult childhood to the Marine Corps and from rock bottom to hope for the future.

In the epilogue to his book, John shares the Valentine's Day menu he prepared for Jessica in 2018, which had been provided for him by his friend and mentor, *Food Network* Chef Robert Irvine.

At the bottom of the menu, Peck fittingly sums himself up in a "recipe" for the main dish: "One half-pound of determination; one cup of resilience; two ounces of fearlessness; three ounces of Marine spirit; and two full cups of heart."



NANCY S. LICHTMAN

Alyssa Olsen, a PT assistant who worked extensively with Peck after his transplant surgery, stands beside the therapy pool at Walter Reed Bethesda, April 2. She says swimming is an incredible therapy tool for amputees and was an important factor in Peck's recovery.

The Marine Shop

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