

# AFSA

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## DEVELOPING LEADERS

CMSAF# 18 Kaleth O. Wright



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The Thunderbirds continue a legacy of excellence

# EVERY AIRMAN HAS A STORY

THE INVISIBLE WOUNDS INITIATIVE IS FOCUSED ON  
ENHANCING BRAIN HEALTH AND PERFORMANCE





*By listening to what they have to say, you could save a life. You're in a position to help.*

Everyone has a story, a significant memory, a past. Tech. Sgt. Trevor Brewer and Senior Master Sgt. Joe Chwalik have been through their share of trauma that left long-lasting emotional scars, yet found their way back by asking for help when they needed it most.

Now, they are helping fellow Airmen by sharing their personal stories of pain and healing. They aim to change negative perceptions about seeking brain health assistance by being examples to others. Their stories are ones of hope and resilience.

### **I WAS JUST WAITING FOR MY TIME TO DIE**

Tech. Sgt. Trevor Brewer arrived at Frankfurt Airport, Germany, in March 2011 with his fellow Airmen from the 48<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Squadron from Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England. The unit was en route to deploy to Kandahar, Afghanistan. Soon after they boarded a bus bound for Ramstein Air Base, Brewer heard what he describes as “pops, like a vehicle running over a rock,” but initially thought nothing of it. Immediately though, he saw a man board the bus armed with a pistol.

“Allahu Akbar,” screamed the intruder as he pulled the trigger, killing the bus driver. In that split second, Brewer realized someone was there to kill them. And he took cover.

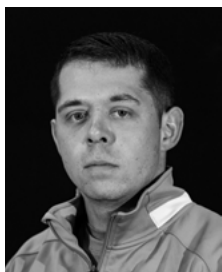
“There was nowhere for me to go,” says Brewer emotionally. “I put my head between my knees and said, ‘Goodbye.’ I was just waiting for my time to die.”

While his head was down, all he heard over and over and over was “Allahu Akbar,” followed by nonstop gunfire. He vividly recalls the smell of gunpowder overwhelming his nostrils. His senses were on fire as he lost all sense of time. That is, until the gunman arrived at Brewer’s seat, and they locked eyes.

“At first, I was focused on the barrel of the gun, but then I looked into his eyes,” shares Brewer. “The only thing I saw was pure hate.”

The next thing that happened could only be fate. The gunman raised the pistol, pointed it at Brewer, and pulled the trigger. But this time, it didn’t go off. It jammed. He tried once more yelling, “Allahu Akbar,” but again it jammed.

At that point, the gunman turned and fled. Brewer’s years of training and time in security forces kicked in. He jumped up to pursue the suspect, briefly slipping on the floor of the bus on what he later discovered was a pool of his fellow Airmen’s blood.



The Invisible Wounds Initiative (IWI) is designed to provide oversight, guidance and advocacy to ensure Airmen suffering from invisible wounds successfully reintegrate back to duty or transition into Veteran status with dignity and respect. The initiative was developed in February 2016 by the Air Force’s top leadership and is led by the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

An Air Force cross-functional team works that integrates quality-of-life efforts, improves readiness, and influences future policies and processes. Their focus is to increase emphasis on the quality and continuity of care for the Airmen and families suffering from invisible wounds.” to read: “Their focus is to increase emphasis on the quality and continuity of brain health and performance for all Airmen and their families through training and education.

To learn more about the IWI, visit the [Invisible Wounds](#) website.



The bus that transported Tech. Sgt. Trevor Brewer and his fellow Airmen from the 48<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Squadron being towed from Frankfurt Airport, Germany following the attack in March 2011. (Photo Courtesy of Reuters)

Brewer caught up to and cornered the gunman, who was holding a knife, on the second floor of Terminal 2. At that moment, they briefly made eye contact one final time, and the hate that he first saw had turned to fear.

German police arrived to detain the suspect and allowed Brewer to return to the bus to assess the situation and aid his Airmen. What he found was two Airmen, Airman First Class Zachary Cuddeback and Senior Airman Nicholas Alden, had been killed, and two more were severely wounded.

Within a few weeks of returning home, Brewer knew something was wrong. The incident had been replaying in his mind on repeat. He cleared his home 15 to 20 times each day, as thoughts crept into his head that someone was hiding and waiting to “finish the job.”

After a few weeks, sitting alone at his desk, it hit him that he couldn't go on. The symptoms of his invisible wounds had begun to take over his life. He needed to talk to someone immediately. Brewer believes that going to mental health helped him stay in the military. “I wouldn't have lasted very long without treatment,” he says. “Seeking counseling helped my career.”

One of the first steps he took when his healing journey began seven years ago was to write down his story, by hand, multiple times. According to Brewer, being able to release his story and get it off his chest was incredibly healing. Now, he is sharing his story with audiences across the Air Force as an Ambassador for the Air Force Wounded Warrior (AFW2) Program.



Tech. Sgt. Trevor Brewer addressing fellow Airmen, sharing his story and explaining the importance of seeking help when it comes to mental health. (U.S. Air Force photo by Nellis Air Force Base)

## WHAT IS AN INVISIBLE WOUND?

Invisible wounds are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI); or other cognitive, emotional, or behavioral disorders associated with trauma experienced by an individual. These can be incurred through combat and non-combat-related activities, such as accidents, assaults and disasters. Invisible wounds lack physical markers and are often unnoticeable to others.

These struggles are still an ongoing battle for Brewer. He says, “There have been improvements. I manage it better than I used to. It's definitely not as severe. I am still healing. For me, I don't think I'm ever going to stop healing. I'm going to continue to heal for the rest of my life.”

He hopes that by sharing his story he can give others suffering from invisible wounds hope.

“People have a negative view about going to mental health,” Brewer says. “I can tell you I've gone to mental health. I've returned to full duty. I'm a flight chief who leads 50 Airmen and protects 96,000 personnel. I use myself as an example to give people hope that they can get help and stay in the Air Force.”

### I WAITED TWO YEARS TO GET HELP. I WISH I WOULDN'T HAVE.

Like many, Senior Master Sgt. Richard “Joe” Chwalik witnessed a lot during his deployment to Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2009. However, an incident in October of that year left a lasting impact on him. He was on a dismantled patrol when a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device detonated near his location, killing over 15 and injuring dozens more.



Chwalik suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) that day. Initially, doctors diagnosed him with a concussion, and it would take two years before they would discover the full extent of his injuries. In a post-deployment evaluation, the physician examining him began crying when Chwalik shared what he'd witnessed “down range.” This display of empathy





**32%** of troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have displayed symptoms of invisible wounds



**300,000** service members have been diagnosed with PTSD since 2001



More than **320,000** service members have been diagnosed with a TBI since 2001

had a negative impact on Chwalik and caused him to shut down. Turning inward with his feelings, he made what he considers the biggest mistake of career. He left the facility.

Unfortunately, Chwalik did not return to seek help for almost two years. That time wasn't easy. Due to fears of the medical evaluation board process, he numbed his pain with sleeping pills during the week and alcohol on the weekends. He describes his symptoms as flashbacks, anger, frustration, night sweats, terror and sleepless nights. He constantly relived Afghanistan. He also struggled daily with his undiagnosed TBI. Academics became extremely difficult—he was enrolled in the Noncommissioned Officer Academy and had a very hard time comprehending the material. It finally reached the point that his wife, friends and leaders talked him into seeking help.

Mental health providers gave Chwalik effective tools to help deal with his invisible wounds; tools that soon would become more useful to him than he would realize.

The resiliency he learned from his mental health providers helped him through an onslaught of health issues that soon befell his family. Chwalik's daughter was diagnosed with cancer at just 15 years old. While the family was reeling from this, they learned their three-year-old son, who has Down Syndrome and severe heart problems, had Hodgkin lymphoma. Six months later, Chwalik's mother was diagnosed with cancer.

Chwalik says these issues rocked him to his core and without the help he had sought previously, he would not be where he is today. He says, "I already knew how to handle that great amount of stress. I waited two years to get help, but I wish I wouldn't have."

Finding ways to control the issues is an ongoing struggle, but nothing feels insurmountable anymore. "It's more like maintenance. I hope the maintenance contract doesn't ever come up," he says with a laugh.

"I got the help I needed, and it didn't hurt me," Chwalik states. "I'm a senior master sergeant and first sergeant in the United States Air Force. I'm in the two percent club. I've

continued to excel in my career. It never slowed me down. It might have been a speed bump, but I've been able to continue. And doing that is because I had solid leadership around me when I truly needed it."

#### **FINDING HEALING BY SHARING THEIR STORIES**

Chwalik finds healing from being a part of the Air Force Wounded Warrior (AFW2) community. As an ambassador, mentor and AFW2's traveling first sergeant, he has a significant role in the wounded warrior community. He believes that the beauty of the program is being surrounded by those who understand what you have been through.

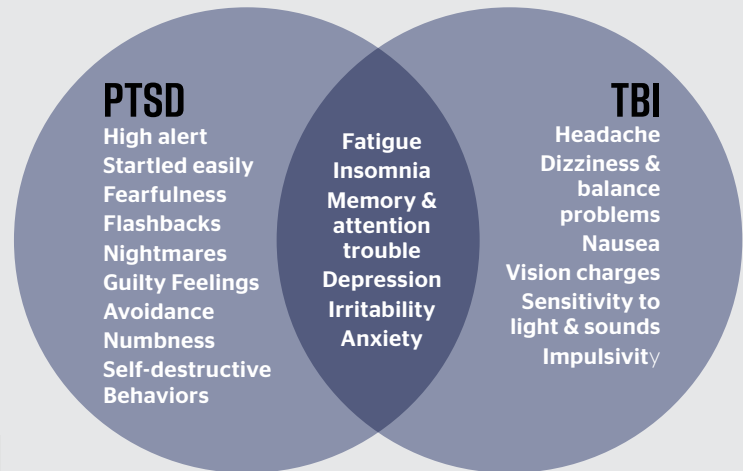


Senior Master Sgt. Chwalik pictured with his three-year-old son, Jeremy, who encouraged his drive to seek mental health support. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Senior Master Sgt. Chwalik)

## AN INVISIBLE WOUND IS A WOUND, NOT A WEAKNESS.

Are you or someone you know suffering from an invisible wound? Seeking care early and often greatly enhances successful treatment and positive outcomes. Even if you do not suffer from invisible wounds, you play a critical role in caring for your fellow Airmen. Watch for the signs and symptoms and help them get the care they need. To learn more about available resources to get help for Airmen and their families in need, visit the [Invisible Wounds](#) website.

### SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PTSD AND TBI:



“I relate to the warriors because I’m a wounded warrior,” explains Chwalik. “I’ve been able to connect with sexual assault victims, cancer patients and countless Airmen with post-traumatic stress disorder.”

Brewer has found healing through AFW2 as well. He believes his healing was partially on hold until he started connecting with fellow Airmen at AFW2 events. He says,

“For the seven years that I didn’t talk about my incident, I thought that I was healed. But it took me joining the ambassador program and sharing my story to realize I wasn’t. So, I guess you could say, I put my healing on hold and hit the pause button. And about four months ago, I hit play.”

#### YOU ARE IN A POSITION TO HELP.

Brewer and Chwalik work together to mentor wounded warriors. Both regularly share their stories to help provide opportunities for other Airmen to learn about the value of seeking help for invisible wounds. And both agree that taking care of Airmen should continue to be a top priority across the Air Force.

“Take care of your Airmen,” is the key takeaway Brewer says he wants all leaders to remember. “I believe if you help an Airman get the help they need, they will return to work, and I guarantee, they’re going to work ten times harder for you than any other Airman out there.”

Chwalik reminds others to pay attention and be good Wingmen. He says, “Every Airman has a story. Sitting back and listening is key. Too many times warriors talk about how doors were shut on them. Don’t shut the door on those Airmen. Don’t be afraid to ask the hard question. Listen to their story, because you never know what they’re going to say. Encourage your Airmen to get the help they need. You’re in a position to help.”



Senior Master Sgt. Chwalik and Gen. David L. Goldfein, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force. Gen. Goldfein serves as the senior uniformed Air Force officer responsible for the organization, training and equipping of active-duty, Guard, Reserve and civilian forces serving in the United States and overseas. (U.S. Air Force Photo provided by Senior Master Sgt. Chwalik).