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## The Road from Marja: Wounded in Afghanistan, Capt. Erik Quist '99, USMC, sees another side of combat

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# THE ROAD

STORY GERRY BOYLE '78

PHOTOGRAPHY NICK CARDILICCHIO





The convoy rolled out of the U.S. Marines' camp on the morning of Aug. 5. For Captain Erik Quist '99, a month into a deployment to the rugged and restive area north of Marja in Afghanistan's Helmand Province, it was a first chance to visit eight outlying bases manned by the 220 newly installed Marines under his command. "See my Marines and say, 'Hey, how are we doing?'" Quist said. "Make sure they were doing all the right things."

He never got there.

# FROM MARJA

Wounded in Afghanistan, Capt. Erik Quist '99, USMC, sees another side of combat

On a road through the Helmand Province farmland, Quist's armored vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb packed with more than 60 pounds of explosives. The bomb was detonated by someone pulling a wire trigger, the explosion ripping through the truck's steel-plate floor.

The driver was slightly injured. The gunner was seriously injured. The Navy corpsman riding in the rear seat was severely injured. Quist, in the front passenger seat, was the most badly hurt, with seven fractured vertebrae, from his tailbone to his neck, broken heel bones in both feet, his left leg broken where it attaches to the ankle.

The heat from the explosion spattered his left foot with second- and third-degree burns. An artery in his neck was separated, the lining of the artery blown loose.

Quist was pulled from the wreckage, treated at the scene, and medevaced to Camp Bastion, the NATO hospital in Helmand. Five days later, after a stop for treatment at a military hospital in Germany, he was delivered, along with his injured corpsman, to the Walter Reed National Military Center in Bethesda, Md., where an entire floor is dedicated to treatment of servicemen and women severely injured in combat.

"Everybody asks me how I am," Quist said, in his hospital bed, a cervical collar clamped around his injured neck, both feet in casts, pain medication flowing through an intravenous tube. "My first word is 'lucky.'"





**HE KNOWS FULL WELL** that he came close to death, but he also knows he was spared the even more severe injuries suffered by those all around him on Fourth Floor East.

The “Wounded Warriors Floor,” as it is known, brings a visitor face to face with some of the consequences of the Afghan war. A young man with both feet amputated sits in a wheelchair by the elevator. There are two young men on the ward who have lost both legs below the waist. They transport themselves along the tile-floored corridors on wheeled platforms, like skateboarders. Double amputees, triple amputees. Quist knows because soon after he arrived, he began making the rounds.

At the time, Quist, 34, was one of two officers on the floor. This is typical because the Afghan war is what Marines call “a squad leader’s fight,” fought by enlisted Marines rather than the officers.



*Erik Quist '99, then an assistant operations officer, left, with fellow officers in Barwanab, Iraq, in December 2006. (contributed photo)*

“They want to talk to somebody else who was on the ground, in the same fight, eating the same dirt. When they get that in an officer form, they’ll ask a lot of questions. And the first question usually is, ‘Once I get my prosthetic legs put on, can I get back to the fight?’” —Erik Quist

“A sergeant,” Quist said. “Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three. They’re out there and they’re making the hard decisions as to whether the guy who just got injured needs to be medevaced right now. Or two hours from now. They’re the guys making the decision whether they need artillery or an air strike. Right now. They’re the guys making the decision what key leaders need to be visited and, once they’re visited, do we help them out? They’re making some huge decisions at a very young age.

“They’re the ones putting in all the work. It’s the young enlisted guys, unfortunately, who end up here.”

**IT TOOK THE HOSPITAL STAFF 45 MINUTES** to ready Quist for his wheelchair. It was an arduous process, one that required Quist to give himself a few extra jolts of painkiller. But he felt it was his responsibility to continue to lead his Marines. In effect, a new squad had formed on Fourth Floor East.

“They want to talk to somebody else who was on the ground, in the same fight, eating the same dirt,” Quist said. “When they get that in an officer form, they’ll ask a lot of questions. And the first question usually is, ‘Once I get my prosthetic legs put on, can I get back to the fight?’”

He paused.

“I don’t have that answer,” he said.

But Quist does understand exactly why a 20-year-old Marine with one leg would want to go back into combat. Quist knows because he intends to do the same thing, when and if he can. “My roommate from college keeps saying, ‘How many more times do you have to go over there?’” Quist said.

He doesn’t have to go. He never did. Quist went to Marine Corps Officer Candidate School, was commissioned,

then served two tours in Iraq. He survived the fighting around Ramadi and the Haditha Triangle, but some of the Marines under his command did not. And yet he didn’t hesitate to fight in Afghanistan, won’t hesitate to return to Helmand Province.

“Don’t get me wrong. I hate being away from Liz,” he said, as his wife, Liz Czernicki Quist ’98, stood by his bedside. “I don’t like being away from Mom and Dad. Certainly, I love what I have in the United States. But when you go there and you see what’s going on and you see the improvements that are being made. ...”

**BEFORE HE WAS CAPT. ERIK QUIST**, USMC, he was Erik Quist, Colby economics major and business administration and sociology minor. One of his teachers, Herbert E. Wadsworth Professor of Economics James Meehan, remembers Quist as a smart and interesting student—and knows him now as a smart and interesting Marine officer. “He’s clearly a very thoughtful guy,” said Meehan, who visited Quist at the Bethesda hospital. “He’s not just somebody sent over there with a gun.”



*Pins protrude from Marine Corps Capt. Erik Quist’s left heel, shattered in a bomb blast in Afghanistan in August.*



Quist describes his Colby self as entrepreneurial, “not really Gordon Gecko,” he said. “I wanted to go out and make money.” He did just that.

Quist lived in Virginia and worked for tech companies as that industry was booming. He was 23, driving a BMW, and liked his job. And yet something was missing, he said.

Liz Quist remembers the first signs. “We were still dating at the time,” she said. “He kept coming back to ... my apartment and saying, ‘You know, I don’t feel like I’ve done anything today for God or country.’ I looked at him like, ‘What does that mean?’

“He said, ‘I love what I’m doing. I love the money I’m making, but it’s just not the same.’”

The same as what?

Erik Quist’s father, Burton Quist, was a career Marine Corps officer, fought in Vietnam. Both his grandfathers served in the Marines in World War II, both fighting on Guadalcanal. But growing up, Erik Quist and his brother Carl were just regular guys. Erik Quist said his parents never pushed them toward the Marine Corps and his mother, Catherine Quist, says she doesn’t recall the boys even talking about it.

But Burton Quist had a saying, his son said. “He’d come home from work and he’d say, ‘So what did you do for God and country today?’ It was his way of engaging me in, ‘What did you do today?’ But I think a little bit was to remind me, ‘You’re having fun, it’s okay, but just remember there are bigger things out there, bigger needs.’ We would kind of laugh about it.”

But by 2002—in the wake of 9/11—Quist wasn’t laughing.

“It started to build a little bit, a little bit more, and at the end I said, ‘I’m adding to somebody else’s bottom line.’ So I started to rethink where I wanted to go.”

At 24 Quist decided to join the Marine Corps and applied to Officer Candidate School. Meehan, his economics professor at Colby, wrote his recommendation.

Five years later, Carl Quist also joined the Marine Corps. He

now is a lieutenant serving in Afghanistan. When Erik Quist was wounded, his young brother was flown to the hospital in Helmand to see him. Carl Quist talked to his parents by satellite phone and reassured them. “He said, ‘He’s sitting in bed eating a piece of pizza. He’s banged up but he’s going to be okay,’” Liz Quist recalled.

Perhaps only in the Marine Corps could the injured Quist be described as “banged up.”

**A RECENT TUESDAY MORNING** began for Quist before 5 a.m. when medical teams arrived at his bedside. “He’s got a pain management team, a neurosurgery team, an orthopedic team, occupational therapy, physical therapy,” Liz Quist said. “You name it.”

That morning, Quist was holding an electrical device over his left temple. There were other pads attached to his back and shoulders. A machine shot electrical charges into areas to dampen the spasms caused by his spine injuries.

The medical teams had concluded that Quist was ready to be moved from Bethesda to what is known as a “poly-trauma” rehab unit at a Veterans Administration hospital. There is one in Richmond, Va., but the other possibilities are in Minnesota, Florida, and California.

But Liz Quist explained that she’s a certified public accountant and has her own business. She is also a town councilor in the couple’s hometown of Occoquan and has responsibilities there. She’s been going home once a week, driving in the middle of the night to avoid traffic, and bringing work back to the hospital. Quist’s mother, Catherine, hadn’t left Bethesda since arriving at the hospital Aug. 10, a month earlier, from Rhode Island. His dad had to return to work but continued to visit.

“If you’re talking about Tampa or Palo Alto,” Liz Quist said, “I don’t know how that’s going to work out.”

**WHEN IT COMES TO NAVIGATING THE BUREAUCRACY** that surrounds wounded warriors, the Quists are lucky as well.



*Captain Erik Quist '99 does exercises under the direction of a physical therapist at Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia.*



*Above, boots protect his severely injured feet and ankles, shattered by the force of the bomb set off under his armored vehicle.*



During Erik Quist's first tour in Iraq, one of their close friends died in combat. Liz Quist joined with other Marine Corps wives to start the Semper Fi Fund, a nonprofit that assists family members of wounded Marines.

In 18 months the group raised \$10 million. "We opened ten thousand pieces of mail in my kitchen and my living room while he was deployed," Liz Quist said.

"I got home [from Iraq in 2004] and I go on mail-opening duty," Quist said. "Here's a ten-dollar check, a five-dollar check, a few quarters that a five-year-old put in an envelope."

The Semper Fi fund has disbursed millions to the families of wounded Marines, helping pay for travel, housing, lost income. Liz Quist said she had a very hard time walking into hospital rooms and talking to the Marines, their families. "Now to be back here as one of those families—it's bizarre," she said.

Through her work with the Semper Fi Fund and the Bob Woodruff Foundation, for traumatic brain injury, Liz Quist is familiar with the world of the wounded and their families. But it's a new experience for her husband. "Liz understood this aspect of it," he said. "I didn't. The Marines I had who were injured or killed, I never saw them again."



*Captain Erik Quist '99 visits with his wife, Liz Czernicki Quist '98 and his mother-in-law, Mary Beth Czernicki, during a break from rehab exercises.*

"... seeing kids go back to school. That's a huge step. Seeing the local markets open up again. To see the activity. Gas pumps that haven't been working in, you know, years. And now they're up and running again. ... The question is, how can we further that success with the time available?" -Erik Quist

**NOW QUIST SEES IT EVERY DAY.** In between the medical treatments there are the visitors. Family friends and Colby friends. Representatives of veterans' groups. And also Marines and soldiers who once were wounded warriors themselves.

Quist said he had a visit from a Marine, a former staff sergeant who lost one leg below the knee. "He was in here with his daughter," he said. "Instead of going to the movies or whatever, they come here."

Just as Erik Quist visits the enlisted Marines on the floor, senior officers come to visit him. The assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Joseph Dunford, came to his room to personally award a Purple Heart and has visited several times. A staffer for the national security advisor stopped and talked to him about the situation in Afghanistan. "So what do you think?" Quist recalled. "What have you seen?"

The evaluation and understanding of the problems posed

by the conflict in Afghanistan is an ongoing process, he said, and the military's methods have advanced since he fought in Iraq. The Combat Op Center in Ramadi in 2004 consisted of a couple of laptops. In Afghanistan the equivalent center has "live UAV feeds, flat panel televisions, bunch of computers all tracking different stuff on battlefield, five or six different radios."

But all of that technology can result in informa-

tion overload unless considerable analytical skills are brought to bear. "The first step is problem framing," Quist said. "Frame out issues within that problem."

"How much firepower the enemy brings to the fight, what are the NGOs we can deal with. Who are the power brokers, where are the local schools, what tribe is this. ... You have to bring all of that into the problem or the mission at hand and apply it to the problem set."

Quist said he applies critical-thinking skills he learned at Colby to the problems he faces in Helmand Province. "Being at Colby," he said, "[Liz and I] obviously have run into some pretty brilliant minds. In fact Professor Meehan owes me the solution to a sustainable economy structure for Afghanistan."

He smiled, his face pinched by the collar. "He promised me that he would provide that."

But Quist says some of the smartest people he's met have been in the Marine Corps. "Being able to build recognition primed decision-making [a military term], where you can take in vast amounts of information and be able to quickly make a decision. And then quickly reanalyze the action of that decision and make further decisions and adjustments," he said.

All of that takes place in a part of Afghanistan where there are daily "engagements," though the battles are shorter than the battles Quist saw in Iraq in 2004. In Afghanistan, he said, there is more opportunity to create relationships with the local people. And it isn't only officers learning the culture.

"It's amazing what some of the younger Marines—eighteen, nineteen, twenty—are doing. ... They'll read books upon books—Afghan culture, Taliban culture, Taliban history, Afghan history. They will dive into language. Rosetta Stone. Some of them outpace me."

**THEY ARE USING THESE SKILLS** in the area north of Marja, an area that has been a Taliban stronghold. U.S. Marines, Afghan soldiers, and British troops invaded Marja in February 2010, driving insurgents out. Quist's 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, (1/6 in military shorthand) was then sent north of the town to what he describes as the insurgency's last foothold in the area. Since then, the Marines have been fighting to push out the Taliban or



eliminate them in place. Across the region, and in Quist's area of operation—rugged countryside around the towns of Karez-e-sayyidi and Badula Qulp—the Taliban have fought back.

"The reason is because it's right on the edge," Quist said. "The enemy knows that the people don't want them there anymore. The enemy knows that we are making advances. ... They know that their time there is limited. They are trying desperately to hold onto this because it's the last piece of area that they can really hold on to."

Insurgents continue to murder civilians, he said, and the Taliban has stepped up attacks on U.S. and Afghan forces.

"And they're losing," Quist said. "So this is becoming desperation hour now. ... That's where you get back to the test of wills. Who has more will and who is more willing to maintain and continue the fight longer."

The cost is apparent. Quist, through a Marine liaison on the hospital staff, gets regular reports from his company. "Unfortunately, I've received more than my fair share of casualty reports," he said, his voice lowered. "We've had a few KIA and several WIA."

But Quist is adamant that progress is being made.

"Seeing kids go back to school. That's a huge step. Seeing the local markets open up again. To see the activity. Gas pumps that haven't been working in years, now they're up and running. Schools that haven't been used because the Taliban told them they couldn't use them are now open.

"The question is, how can we further that success with the time available?"

Quist is aware of the political realities surrounding the Afghan war, both at home and in the villages and towns where his Marines operate.

In Helmand Province that means offering people a better alternative to life under the Taliban. And a better life is tied to economic opportunity and safety.

"At least a semipermanent economic growth," Quist said.

The path to that is convincing locals that they can rely on their own security forces, backed by the Marines. The tactics and technology used by the United States there have limited collateral damage, he said. "The unit that was there before us, they had no civilian casualties for their time there. ... We're able to do that, plus, as we grow a relationship with the local elders, we help them improve their villages, gain security in their villages. They are much more willing to provide us information that allows us to be a bit better at what we do."

And he knows the reality of that relationship, too.

Quist said he was building relationships with local elders but knows to take expressions of friendship with caution. "I've had,

every day, three or four key-leader engagements," he said. "And [at each one] I would have a key leader or three key leaders or just local power brokers sitting in front of me. I would not be surprised if one, two, three of them were the enemy. And I don't know it, but that's the arena in which I have to operate."

And would those leaders regret that the Marine captain with whom they'd been having tea had been seriously wounded? "For those that are friendly, I'm sure that the note they took was that, hey, the guy in charge was just hit," Quist said. "If the guy in charge was hit, what does that mean?"

So what does it mean? For Quist, it's months of medical treatment and rehab, maybe a change in the direction of his career in the Marine Corps. For his wife and his family, it means a change in life as they knew it. For the mission in Afghanistan, he said, it means very little.

"I fully expect that we're going to continue to do what the company before us did, and the company before them did, which

was continuously build a cumulative effect that continues to make the locals understand why we're here, what we're doing, how it benefits them both in the short and the long run. Once they see that, and once they understand that, they're a hundred percent more than willing to jump on board and not help us but help themselves." ©



*Quist listens as the condition of his left ankle and foot is assessed.*

## EPILOGUE

Almost three months after the explosion that changed his life, Erik Quist was faced with another decision

that could be life-changing. Wait for his left foot to heal enough for fusion surgery, and work through recovery that could take years, or elect for amputation, which would leave him with a more certain future.

That was the situation in late November, when Quist and his wife Liz Quist met with his medical team.

They told him that his left foot is "off the charts" in terms of severity of damage. They said they will try the fusion, if possible. But the foot hasn't healed enough for surgery yet, and the longer that tissue healing takes, the more the bones deteriorate. "It is a Catch-22," Quist wrote in an e-mail from the hospital in Richmond, Virginia.

The other option? "After much prodding, the doctor recommended that I consider amputation of the left foot," Quist wrote.

As of this writing, Nov. 30, the Quists had decided to press on with treatment, despite the daunting odds and the prospect of a long and arduous recovery.

"At the beginning of this journey the doctors were concerned about infection in, and amputation of, the right foot at Camp Bastion. I beat it," Erik Quist wrote. "Then, at Bethesda, the docs were concerned about the tissue damage and dying tissue on the left foot which would have required amputation. I beat that. The current situation? Who knows, but Liz and I expect to go three for three."