

# Be Inspired: **PATRICK NUGENT**

BY CRAIG COLLINS

**HE CAME FROM A MILITARY FAMILY — HIS GRANDFATHER A NAVAL AVIATOR, HIS FATHER A MARINE — BUT AS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT PATRICK NUGENT HADN'T FIXED A BULL'S EYE ON A MILITARY CAREER. HE WAS CURIOUS ABOUT THE MILITARY, AND HIS CHOICE FOR HIGHER LEARNING, THE CITADEL, OFFERED FLEXIBILITY. "I WENT THERE BECAUSE YOU CAN CHOOSE BETWEEN ANY OF THE FIVE BRANCHES," HE SAID, "AND YOU CAN GO THE ENLISTED ROUTE IF YOU WANT, OR THE OFFICER ROUTE IF YOU WANT — OR AT THE END OF FOUR YEARS, IF YOU DIDN'T REALLY LIKE YOUR EXPERIENCE, YOU COULD GO THE CIVILIAN ROUTE. SO I USED THAT FIRST YEAR TO OBSERVE THE DIFFERENT BRANCHES AND HOW THEY OPERATED. AND THE MARINE CORPS WAS THE BRANCH OF SERVICE I THOUGHT BEST FIT MY PERSONALITY AND WHAT I WANTED TO DO."**

Once he'd made his choice, Nugent threw himself into his studies and preparation for a career as a Marine officer. It was a distinguished beginning: He graduated in 2013 as the Cadet Regimental Commander, the senior cadet who led the entire Corps of Cadets. From the Citadel, Nugent went to the Basic School for all newly commissioned and appointed Marine Corps officers, and then on to the grueling Infantry Officer School, from which he emerged an infantry officer and served as a rifle platoon commander in 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (1/5), Company C.

His first deployment, with the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), took him to Japan and Southeast Asia from 2015 through 2016. He was selected to serve as Company C's executive officer — its second-in-command, overseeing the day-to-day activities of more than 160 other Marines — and later deployed with the 1/5 as part of the 15th MEU, the Marine Air-Ground Task Force within the three-ship USS *America* Amphibious Ready Group.

Nugent was thriving as a Marine, and looked forward to enrolling in the Assessment and Selection (A&S) course as a candidate for the Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) the following spring. "I had other plans in the service," he said, "but obviously a bullet kind of derailed those plans." Five days into the group's first overseas deployment, when his unit stopped in Hawaii for training on its way to the Western Pacific, Nugent suffered a setback that threatened to end not only his career, but also his life.

## **A Different Trajectory**

During a nighttime live-fire exercise at Pohakuloa Training Area on the big island of Hawaii, Nugent, the range officer in charge, was standing downrange and off to the side when a 5.56-mm M16 round ricocheted off a pile of rocks and entered his lower back, just below his flak jacket.

"When the bullet hit my pelvis, it shattered it and deflected down to the right, through my abdomen, where it caused a bunch of internal injuries," recalled Nugent, "and then it lodged in my right hip and severed the right sciatic nerve at the very top, almost near my spinal column." As soon as he was struck, both his legs went completely numb and he fell forward, unable to move from the waist down. A pair of corpsmen tended to him and he was quickly airlifted to a nearby hospital, where doctors feared he wouldn't survive his abdominal injuries — and if he did, they predicted he would never walk again.

He underwent several surgeries in Hawaii, aimed at saving his life and repairing damage to his pelvis and internal organs, but the wound, which perforated Nugent's bowel, caused persistent infections. "Everything," he said, "went everywhere." He was fitted with a colostomy bag and sent to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where he underwent a series of surgeries aimed at repairing nerve damage.

Once it became clear that Nugent would survive, the loss of the sciatic nerve presented his most consequential challenge. The



longest and thickest single nerve in the body, the sciatic nerve connects the nervous system to the skin over the entire leg and foot, the muscles of the back of the thigh (hamstrings), and those of the calf and foot. His first surgery was aimed at reconnecting the sciatic nerve. "Nobody really knew how bad an injury it was until I got to Walter Reed," he said. "They opened me up and then closed me up pretty quickly, because they saw how high up it was, that it was completely severed, and that it would have been more dangerous to try to do something then." Subsequent surgeries were attempts at nerve transfer, which might restore some feeling to the bottom of his foot and the ability to push his foot down or lift it up.

These procedures haven't yet scored Nugent any successes, but he's focused on the positive: He underwent a successful ostomy reversal, which his closed his bowel off to the outside world, and he's been fitted with a brace that allows him to walk despite complete paralysis from the knee down, with significant atrophy of his calf muscles and no use of his hamstrings. Developed for wounded warriors at the Center for the Intrepid in San Antonio, the IDEO brace (now available in the private sector under the name ExoSymb) is an advanced kinetic orthosis that enables people with severe lower limb injury not only to walk, but also to engage in high-impact activities such as running, jumping and even skydiving.

For six to eight months after his injury, Nugent was all but immobilized, confined to a wheelchair, using an ostomy pouch, and being fed a steady stream of antibiotics through an intravenous catheter in his arm that prevented him from lifting anything heavier than five pounds, which meant he couldn't even use his arms to wheel himself around.

During that time he had one goal in mind: Reuniting with the Marines he'd left behind in Hawaii, who earlier had been told he probably wouldn't survive. His successful reversal surgery made the reunion seem possible. "My biggest accomplishment was having to not rely on a walker or a cane to get around," he said. "I actually kind of forced myself to do it because it was getting close to the time I was scheduled to fly to Hawaii to meet my Marines on the trip back from their deployment."

In February of 2018, a year after his injury, Nugent flew to Hawaii and met with the Marines of Company C. He stood upright and shook their hands.

### An Athlete Restored

Nugent was a three-sport athlete (football, hockey and lacrosse) at Saint Ignatius High School in Cleveland, and went on to become an outside linebacker for The Citadel's football team. It was humbling, he said, to find himself unable to get to the bathroom without help. "I've lost a lot of weight," he said. "When you see me at the games, you'll think I look more like a cornerback."

A return to competitive sports was the furthest thing from Nugent's mind for more than a year after his injury, but adaptive sports became part of his daily routine as he worked toward convincing a Medical Evaluation Board to approve him for another tour of limited duty in his new MOS: Recovering Service Member, Wounded Warrior Battalion East, Bethesda, stationed at Walter Reed. "I was doing everything up to that point," said Nugent, "going to physical therapy four to five days a week, doing adaptive sports on my own, rowing, trying to get myself strong enough in the lower and upper body to be able to earn a physical fitness pass or combat fitness pass and be able to do the stuff that's expected of me."

It was during these therapy and training sessions that Nugent caught the eye of Rachel Jordan, the Warrior Athlete Reconditioning Program Manager for the Marines at Walter Reed, who urged him to sign up for the upcoming Marine Corps Trials at Camp Pendleton. Nugent signed up for rowing, track, cycling and power lifting. "It's just the bench press, which is one of my strengths," he said, "and since I've lost more than thirty pounds since my injury I can compete in the lightweight class."

The IDEO brace Nugent wears for competition is further customized to help him flex his knee for running: it's fitted with bungee cords that act as hamstrings and help pull his foot backwards. He works these artificial hamstrings hard: "I can only use them for three to four training sessions," he said, "before they fray and break. I replace them at least once a week."

When Nugent went to Camp Pendleton to train with other Marines, he said, he could barely keep up with the other runners on their 800-meter warm-up jog. "I was about 100 meters behind them," he said, "and that was just their warm-up pace." By the time of the competition he was good enough to earn a silver medal in the 800 meters, and he won gold medals in both the indoor rowing and powerlifting events. At the DOD Warrior Games in Tampa, he plans to compete in all four events again: track, cycling, indoor rowing and powerlifting. He's hoping to do well enough to qualify for the Invictus Games, now scheduled for 2020 in the Netherlands.

As for his future plans, Nugent is weighing them with the same flexibility and optimism he used to map out a military career that ended earlier than he'd have hoped. He's applying to graduate business schools at several universities, including Stanford, Harvard, Georgetown, Pennsylvania, and Northwestern – the best business schools in the country, in other words. But don't bet against him. Expect to see him on one of these campuses in the fall of 2020.