

GOING THE DISTANCE

On the night of August 17, 2009, C2C Jefferson Sweet awoke from a coma to find himself in a hospital bed. The room was unfamiliar, as was the landscape which appeared through the window. With no recollection of how he had come to be there, Sweet reached back to the last day he could remember. As he would soon learn, his last day of consciousness was half way across the United States, and more than six weeks into the past.

In the summer of 2009, Sweet and his fellow cadets reported for military emersion training at Lackland Air Force Base. The eight-week program paired cadets with the drill instructors conducting basic training for the newly enlisted airmen. The grueling 14-hour days began with revelry at sun up and did not end until the last new airman was secure in his bunk. The cadets were hard-working, and did their best to impart their training from the Academy onto the enlisted.

“After eight weeks in the program,” Sweet recalls, “we were only four days from coming back home. Most of us cadets were all feeling tired, myself included. We all had sore throats from yelling commands all day; and at the time, I simply figured I would tough it out for the next few days until it was time to go home.”

July 4th was a Saturday, and the enlisted who were going through basic training were given a furlough for the holiday. Eager for some much needed rest, the cadets were also granted the night off. “When training resumed on Monday,” Sweet says, “I didn’t show up for work. I wasn’t answering my cell phone, and after a couple of hours, several of my cadet counterparts came looking for me.”

One cadet’s
journey from the
hospital bed to
the terrazzo

By **Lewis Carlyle**

Photos courtesy of **C2C Jefferson Sweet**





Top: unable to walk upon waking from his coma, Cadet Sweet awaits the start of his rehabilitation
Bottom Right: Cadet Sweet begins the painful process of regaining motor function and mobility

Much to their horror, Sweet's classmates found him unconscious on the floor of his room, half dressed for work, gasping for breath. That day, Sweet was rushed to the intensive care unit at Wilford Hall Medical Center where he was given emergency treatment. He was intubated and placed on a ventilator. Clinging to life, doctors speculated that he would not live through the night.

Yet Sweet beat the odds, skirting his brush with death during those first few critical days. After a multitude of brain scans, he was diagnosed with encephalitis, a virus which causes severe swelling of the cerebellum at the back of the brain. Often transmitted by ticks or mosquitoes, the disease is as rare as it is mysterious. Deep in a coma, the young cadet did not move for six weeks.

Doctors monitored Sweet, placing a feeding tube into his stomach and a breathing tube into his lungs. After the initial weeks, medical personnel removed the intubation tubes, cut a hole in his esophagus, and inserted more permanent tracheotomy ventilator and feeding tubes. Still in a coma, doctors elected to have Sweet airlifted to the Shepherd Center for brain and spinal rehabilitation in Atlanta Georgia. During the first week of August,

his condition improved enough to be taken off the ventilator. And then, during the third week of August, the young cadet emerged from his coma.

"Saturday was about the last day I remember until August 17th," Sweet explains. "From July 4th up through mid August, the entire six weeks was just *one* night for me."

The hospital room was unfamiliar; the tracheotomy tubes were an un-nerving surprise, and the inability to move his limbs was a frightening new reality. "The first thing that I recall," Sweet says, "was the nurse turning the lights on in my room in the middle of the night. Initially, I thought I was still at Lackland. When I tried to get up, I found I couldn't move. I remember being pretty angry, to be honest. I thought someone had broken into my room."

When he attempted to speak, nothing came out. "It's pretty difficult to articulate words with a tracheotomy hole in your neck. The nurse told me I was in Atlanta. For me, that wasn't even the right time zone. I thought she was crazy."

Nothing in the hospital room was recognizable to Sweet except for his cadet picture which his parents had placed on the wall. After several sleepless days, the

cadet finally came to terms with the fact that his situation was no dream. Over the next few weeks, he began a regiment of occupational, physical and speech therapy.

"I had a lot of slurred speech at first," Sweet explains. "The cerebellum controls fine motor skills, balance, coordination, and pretty much anything that physically connects your brain to your body. I knew what to say in my mind, but it wasn't coming out of my mouth properly. Learning to communicate was the first big hurdle."

After the first of October, Sweet was released from Shepherd Center and transitioned to the Pathways outpatient therapy clinic in Atlanta. There, he continued conditioning himself through November. "Occupational therapy encompasses everything from balancing a checkbook to reading a map," Sweet says.

Ironically, the ordeal helped the young cadet learn just how dependent his generation is on technology. "All this time, we've always just plugged coordinates into a GPS and it tells us where to go," he says with a smile. "I took for granted that reading a map can actually be complicated."

In November, Sweet returned to his family in North Carolina. There, he continued his rehabilitation part time at the Care Partners YMCA therapy center. "I was running a lot on my own by this



time, with full intentions of returning to the Academy.”

Sweet explains that the Air Force was going to place him on medical retirement status. In December, he was denied the opportunity to return to the Academy in January. Disappointed, yet undeterred, Sweet set a course to re-secure his place among the Cadet Wing. “From then on, I was on workout mode, all day every day. I’m coming back to the Academy, it’s just a question of when.”

In the first week of August, 2010, C2C Jefferson Sweet was re-admitted to the Air Force Academy. Having lost an entire year, he was no longer set to graduate with the Class of 2011. His classmates with whom he had Inprocessed, endured Basic Cadet Training, lived and worked with for two years were now set to join the Air Force as second lieutenants a full year before him. Fortunately for Sweet, the Class of 2012 has proven an uncommonly accepting brotherhood. “To be honest,” he admits, “it felt like I never really left. The Class of 2012 has been so accommodating. They’ve just brought me into their family like I was one of their own.”

Today, the young cadet stands six foot two inches tall, his blue uniform neatly pressed as he walks across the terrazzo with his classmates. His cheerful optimism is infectious and his demeanor is polished with an ever-present smile. Staying busy with his mechanical engineering major, he keeps a tight schedule. The Academy offers no special treatment, and Sweet wouldn’t have it any other way.

At a glance, there is little remnant of the coma which nearly took his life and left him virtually paralyzed. The only reminder of his ordeal comes in the form of a subtle scar across his esophagus, the place where doctors inserted a tracheotomy tube to sustain his life while his mind lay suspended in darkness for six weeks.

“My Air Officer Commanding, Maj. Nelson, has been fantastic during the whole process,” Sweet says. “I felt like I knew him before I even arrived at the start of the fall semester. We talked on the phone at least once a week during the summer. Eagle 8, my new squadron, has a great family atmosphere.”

Looking back, Sweet realizes that his perspective on life has changed. After

emerging from his coma, the cadet spent several sleepless nights trying to evaluate his life. Unable to move his body and barely able to speak, he found himself turning to God for answers. “There was a time when I felt like giving up. I consider myself to be a pretty religious person. There I was in bed, I couldn’t go anywhere, I couldn’t do anything ...”

Finally, after suffering from total exhaustion, Sweet received the sign he was waiting for. “It wasn’t spoken to me by God; it wasn’t a vision—it’s very hard to explain. All I know is that the sign He gave me was etched into my mind. It said, *go the distance.*”

After interpreting the omen, Sweet was determined not to stop until he was back to being the person he was before he became sick. The hours of physical therapy—learning to walk, learning to speak—all proved to be challenges that helped to rebuild not only his body, but his spirit. “That was God’s plan, and there wasn’t going to be any lack of effort on my part.”

Facing death is no easy challenge for a young person. After fighting his way out of the hospital bed and back onto the terrazzo, Sweet does not look back on his ordeal with regret. Though he may have lost an entire year of his life, he considers the trial of his rehabilitation to be a character building experience which has left him a little stronger, and a lot wiser.

“When we’re in our early twenties,” Sweet says thoughtfully, “we tend to think that we are completely indestructible, that we can do whatever we want and nothing is ever going to happen to us. Today, I’ve learned to appreciate life for what it is, and that it’s not always going to be handed to you on a platter. Life can be easily taken away in the blink of an eye. I try to impart that on people who are a little bit cynical about their time at the Academy, because I too was once one of those people.”

Today, with his new lease on life, Cadet Second Class Jefferson Sweet is looking forward to a bright future. The scar on his neck will forever serve as a reminder that no challenge is too great for a person who is determined to take charge of his own destiny, to stand up in the face of adversity, to fight, to win, to go the distance. ▣

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