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LIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

RETIRED STAFF SERGEANT TRAVIS MILLS IS BACK ONBOARD

BY BRADY L. KAY



When United States Army Staff Sergeant Travis Mills woke up in the hospital after placing his backpack on an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) that detonated and left him without any arms or legs, he had a couple of unusual requests.

"When I woke up, I said all I want is Double Stuff Oreos, pineapple juice and I'm going to buy a double-decker pontoon boat," recalls Mills, who was raised in Michigan and was on his third deployment to Afghanistan at the time. "I'm dead serious, that's what I really said. My grandfather had a pontoon and he used to pull us around on a tube on Higgins Lake and even though I had never owned a boat before, that's what I wanted."

It would take 19 months of rehabilitation at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland before he would be released and in a position to even own and operate a boat. But Mills has never been afraid to look ahead and dream big, and at times he used whatever motivation was needed to help him regain his life. After nearly eight years of service in the Army, Mills officially retired when his rehab was complete and he and his wife Kelsey and their daughter Chloe relocated to the state of Maine to be closer to Kelsey's family.

"It's a true testament to the nation we live in and the time we live in," says Mills. "When I was in Afghanistan in 2012 I got blown up and my arms and legs are now gone, but because we live in this great nation my healthcare is taken care of. I literally went from being fully independent, to being immobile, back to walking and driving again. Because of some amazing foundations I have a home that suits my needs. Gary Sinise is a great person who does a lot of charity work and he told me he would build us a house anywhere we wanted to live and we are truly thankful for that."

The family's two-story adaptive home in Maine includes an elevator and other key features, thanks to the Gary Sinise Foundation and others who made it all possible. Sinise played Lieutenant Dan Taylor in the movie "Forrest Gump" and his character loses his legs in the Vietnam War. Today the actor continues to do a lot for other veterans through his foundation.

BOAT SHOPPING

With a home in place, the next step for Mills was to fulfill the dream of owning his first boat so he began to shop around.

"I started looking around at a couple of local boat shows for a double-decker pontoon so I could jump off the top," says Mills. "I went to the boat show and I knew I was going to get something, but I wasn't exactly sure what. I met with Rob Brown from Clark Marine and he

showed me a double-decker that I really liked."

The double-decker Avalon seemed to be exactly what he was after so he called his wife Kelsey on the phone and they went back and forth before deciding to buy it. However, as luck would have it, he wasn't the only one looking at that particular model.

"I missed out on the Avalon I liked by 10 minutes to a farmer who I guess also wanted a double-decker," says Mills with a laugh. "But it actually worked out better because we ended up going with a different Avalon that was at the show that we really love."

avalon

The Avalon LSZ 2685 Cruise model from Clark Marine wasn't a double-decker, but it had a lot of the same great features as the first boat he was looking to buy.

"They had the same boat with the same layout, but just not a double-decker. The motor on the back was this futuristic-looking E-TEC and he told me this thing will really scoot," recalls Mills. "He said with the 200hp engine it will probably go 40 miles per hour, but I've gotten it up to 49 with just me and another guy on it... going with the wind."

While he has no regrets about his initial decision to join the Army and in fact would prefer to still be serving and not be retired if it wasn't for that IED, Mills is able to get out on the water a lot more often than most boat owners.

"I can be on the water on any given day during the week—depending on my travel schedule—while most can only boat on the weekends," explains Mills. "It's cool that at my age I can enjoy the lake more often than not."

As a motivational speaker, Mills is in high demand these days as people are eager to hear his amazing story that fully demonstrates his willpower and toughness. In fact, in the last three months he's been to more than a dozen states to speak, so clearly he stays plenty busy.



During his third tour of duty in Afghanistan, United States Army Staff Sergeant Travis Mills placed his backpack on an IED just four days shy of his 25th birthday. Against the odds, he survived the blast and endured 19 months of physical therapy as he learned how to live as a quadruple amputee. Today he's a popular motivational speaker and has started his own non-profit foundation to help injured veterans and their families.



Travis and Kelsey Mills enjoy spending time on their Avalon pontoon with their daughter Chloe.



Before doing a back flip off the Avalon pontoon, Travis Mills turns to his friends onboard for a little encouragement as he attempted to do something he hadn't ever done before. He clears the side of the boat easily and successfully lands it while those onboard applaud.

CLARK MARINE

Growing up in Vassar, Mich., Mills still remains faithful to the state of Michigan and admits the fact that Avalon pontoons are built in the Great Lakes State factored into his final decision. But in the end it came down to the quality of the boat and the dealership in his new hometown.

"I was looking at other pontoons through other dealers, but I felt like it would be a slap in the face if I didn't buy from Clark Marine in my town and to be honest I like the motor better than the other boats I was looking at," explains Mills. "I did my research and the G2 I felt was better, plus the boat looked more high-end and I liked the seating and flooring better than the others. And now that I've really gotten to know the guys at Clark Marine, I'm really happy that I went with them."

A few modifications were made to the boat, including building an elevated stand next to the helm with the digital throttle controls raised so Mills can reach them. Using his right shoulder he easily and smoothly controls the power of the Evinrude G2 200hp outboard and even though it has auto trim, he manually trims the engine too. Being able to drive was very important to him, but his boat needed one more tweak to make it ideal for his needs.

NEED A LIFT?

Without his limbs, his circulation is now quicker so Mills gets hot easier. But despite having waterproof legs and a love for the water, he spent last summer watching his



Even as a quadruple amputee, nothing seems to slow down Travis. His Avalon pontoon was modified so he could work the throttle with his right shoulder. His mechanical left hand allows him to grip the steering wheel so he can captain the boat.



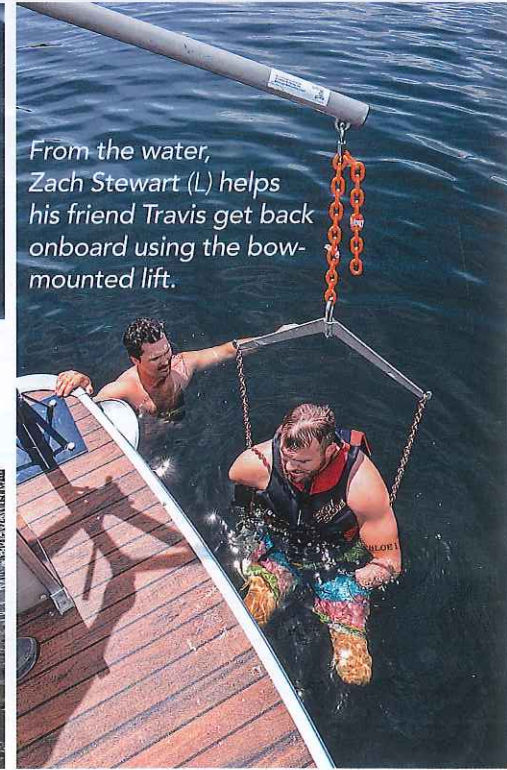
Chloe Mills (R) snacks on a little pizza with her friend Ingrid Stewart between trips on the tube behind the boat.



Travis admits his whole world revolves around his 4-year-old daughter Chloe. With the boat he can continue to do activities with his family and actually participate and not just watch.



The futuristic-looking G2 E-TEC from Evinrude was a main reason the family went with this particular Avalon pontoon.



From the water, Zach Stewart (L) helps his friend Travis get back onboard using the bow-mounted lift.

family swim while he stayed onboard.

"Last summer I would just sit on the boat and cook while my family swam. It was hot for me, but they loved it so much that I didn't mind," says Mills. "Getting back in the boat isn't quite as easy as going into the water, but thanks to a hoist that Clark Marine modified it's now possible."

"Travis is a guy who doesn't let much get in his way," says Brown, who has owned Clark Marine since 1997 after starting as an employee in 1984. "The lift was his idea and using some parts we were able to engineer a system that allows him to get back on the boat."

AMERICAN DREAM

While of course there are still limits on what Mills can and can't do, the family's Avalon pontoon is one of those hobbies they can do together.

"My whole world revolves around my little girl and my wife and I wanted to give Chloe the same experiences I had growing up," says Mills. "I'm still alive, I'm still around and I like to have people around me and hang out and act like nothing happened. It's just a bump in the road that I hit and with the boat it gives me the freedom to go out there with my little girl. I can't play soccer. My little girl can play and by all means I hope she does play sports. However, I can go tubing, I can go boating and I can go fishing. I can still do activities with my family and not just watch them but I can participate. I take my arms and legs off and hop in the tube with Chloe and we go skipping around. Then Chloe gets out and Kelsey gets in and then they really try to flip us out."

A GREATER PURPOSE

Seeing first-hand all the things he still *could* do—like snowboarding, kayaking, downhill mountain biking, etc.—actually led Mills to start his own non-profit foundation to help other wounded servicemen. It started with help from friends Reece and Katie Norris, but Mills credits his wife's uncle Dan Harriman for coming up with the idea to show other veterans how to still experience life, after Mills returned from a Veterans Retreat in Colorado.

"The foundation is a \$2.7 million dollar project and we raised about a million dollars last year and of course we're still raising funds," says Mills. "We bring veterans to Maine who are in a similar situation and show them life goes on, to not be embarrassed by your situation and to not be nervous to fall over in a kayak or not be able to do something. The boat really helps with that independence and it helps structure my life knowing I can participate."

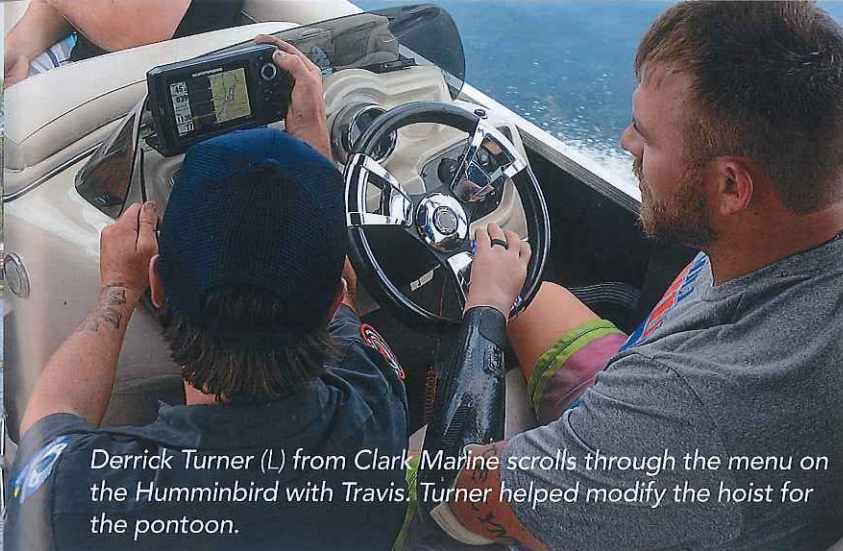
FOUNDATION

The Travis Mills Foundation is a 501c3 non-profit foundation that hosts about 35 to 40 people or 10 families at a time per week for 12 weeks in the summer.

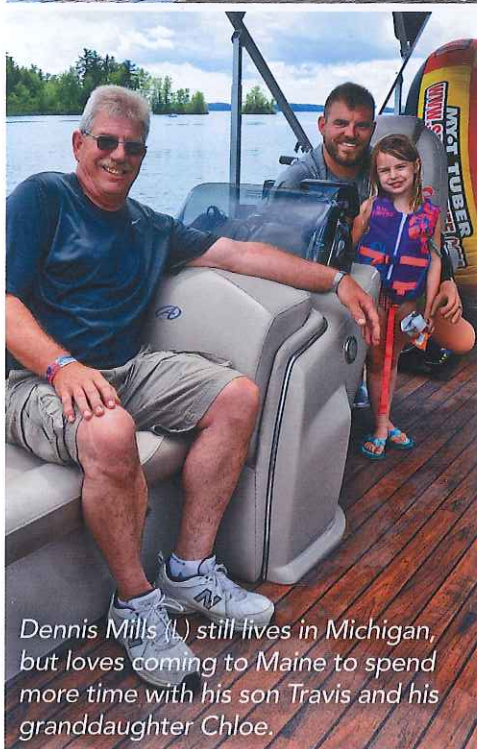
"It lets the kids who have a parent in a similar situation play together, it lets the men or women who have been injured talk and go over different techniques without it being counseling or therapy but rather just hanging out. And then the wives and husbands are a big part of it too. They're going through stuff so we build that network. We show them that life is still possible. I like to say I'm just a small-town kid from Vassar, but we are doing some really big things."

The board for the foundation is made up of all volunteers, including Mills, so the money raised goes to those in need.

"I don't take a paycheck even though I'm the president and I like to take my boat out there to be used by the foundation and when I'm out there I pay for the gas," explains Mills. "Now if a manufacturer wants to donate a couple of boats to the foundation



Derrick Turner (L) from Clark Marine scrolls through the menu on the Humminbird with Travis. Turner helped modify the hoist for the pontoon.



Dennis Mills (L) still lives in Michigan, but loves coming to Maine to spend more time with his son Travis and his granddaughter Chloe.



In his man cave, memorabilia and pictures line the walls as well as reminders of his service in the Army. As a combat soldier, the E6 Staff Sergeant earned the Bronze Star medal—an award given for heroic achievement, heroic service, meritorious achievement, or meritorious service in a combat zone.



Travis Mills wants to share with his daughter (R) the same experiences he had growing up, including tubing. Ingrid Stewart (L) holds on tight while her older sister Stella Stewart prepares for a big wave.

Travis and Kelsey Mills feel like they're truly living the American dream with their daughter Chloe. They now live in a beautiful home and are enjoying life to the fullest.



then by all means, we are a legitimate 501c3. We're a multi-million dollar operation now, which is pretty cool."

LIVING IT UP

With a great support staff in place that includes Kelsey, her parents and other family members who are committed to helping when needed, the sky really is the limit for Mills. And while the term "wounded warrior" has become a common phrase in today's society, he doesn't want to be thought of as wounded, but rather as healed.

"I'm just a man with scars," says Mills, "living life to the fullest and best I know how. I'm grateful for the time we live in because Vietnam vets didn't have this kind of technology and I'm sure the future is going to hold even greater things for us."

Regardless of possible technological advances in the years to come, the future looks promising for Mills and his family. Pontooning is a big part of their life, now that Mills is back onboard and sitting at the helm seat where he belongs. 🦾

FOR MORE INFO:

Avalon Pontoons
www.avalonpontoons.com

Clark Marine
www.clarkmarinemaine.com

Evinrude
www.evinrude.com

Gary Sinise Foundation
www.garysinisefoundation.org

Travis Mills Foundation
www.travismills.org