



# MAXIM

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P.F.C.  
Todd Vance,  
Age 19

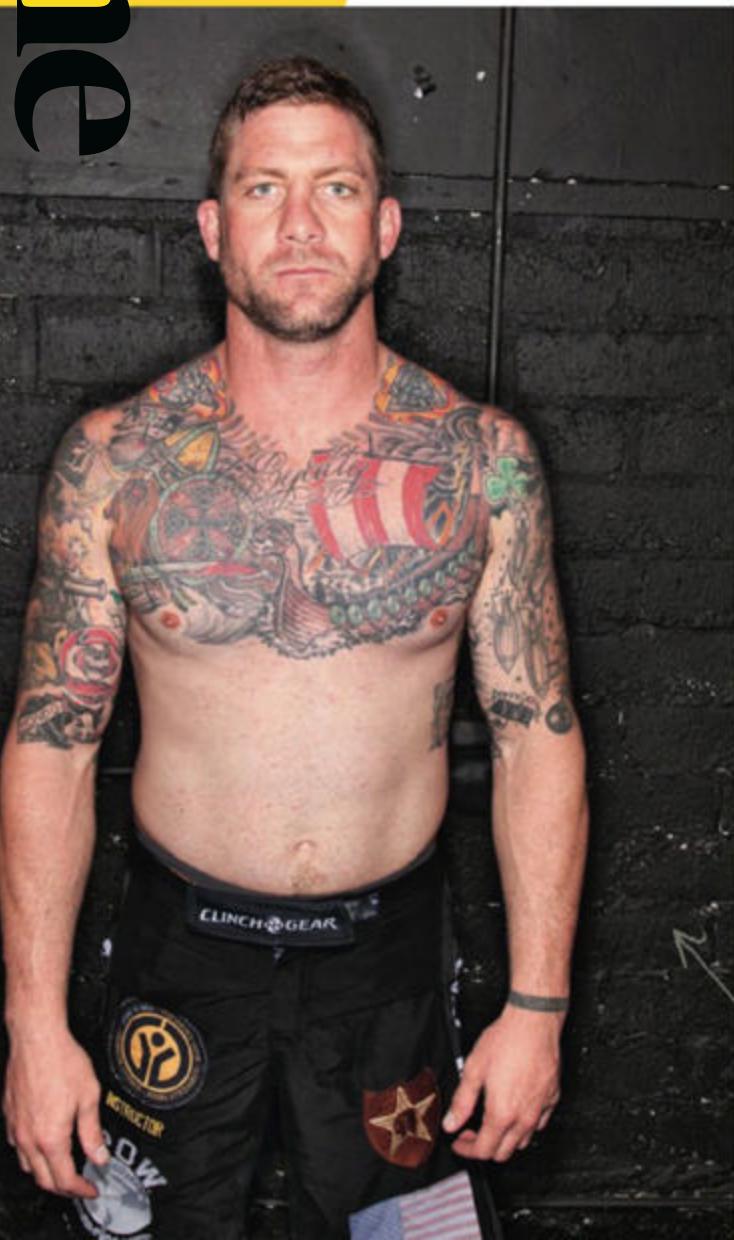
Returning troops are battling drugs and alcohol, suicidal thoughts, and prescription meds that leave them feeling like zombies. Now one pro MMA fighter is helping his fellow ex-soldiers get better—by training them to battle one another instead.

by STEVEN LECKART photographs by PETER BOHLER



# It's time

at Undisputed, a boxing gym in San Diego. Two sweat-drenched guys with necks like tree stumps are grappling on a black mat inside a 24-foot cage with a black chain-link fence. Music from Metallica's *Death Magnetic* blasts on the sound system. Grimacing, one guy breaks his adversary's guard, mounts him, and starts ramming his shin into his opponent's windpipe until the dude's face turns red. It's no secret that mixed martial arts, or MMA, is brutal. There are no head guards. No shin guards. And fewer rules than in any other organized sport where boxing gloves are not mandatory. The violence can be gruesome. Still, there's one big difference between the burly, tattooed men in front of me and basically every pro, amateur, and wannabe you'll see bleeding profusely on YouTube: These guys have killed people. Just not in a cage fight. Today I've joined a special MMA training program for military veterans. It's called Pugilistic Offensive Warrior Tactics, or P.O.W. for short. OK, technically I'm standing outside the cage. But even if I weren't too chickenshit to get in there, I'm off the hook. The first rule of this fight club: no civilians.



**ONCE A WEEK** some guy at the gym asks to train with the veterans. The answer is always the same: "No, man, it's just for us," says P.O.W.'s head coach, Todd Vance, a jacked 31-year-old covered in tattoos. A former Army infantry squad leader who fought in Iraq, Vance founded P.O.W. in July 2010 with no funding or assistance from the VA. Since then more than 100 vets have attended his free three-times-a-week classes.

More than half the P.O.W. vets have been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder. A severe anxiety disorder, PTSD (once known as shell shock) is characterized by a litany of symptoms, including flashbacks, repeated nightmares, outbursts of anger, irritability, easy startling, headaches, dizziness, and "feeling like you have no future."

"This program is full of badasses," he tells me. "But they're more sensitive than freakin' contestants on *America's Next Top Model*!"

The go-to treatments at VA hospitals are psychotherapy and pharmaceuticals. Overprescribing has become so common that soldiers have taken to calling the meds "ranger candy."

What's remarkable—counterintuitive, even—is that the P.O.W. vets swear the intense, violent full-contact sport helps them cope with PTSD. In some cases, they say MMA's even more effective than the meds.

"Is the sport aggressive? Absolutely. But these guys are that way by nature. You

Todd Vance started P.O.W. in 2010 after more than 250 missions in Iraq left him battling posttraumatic stress disorder.



Vance puts the combat veterans at P.O.W. through their paces. Violence in the cage helps the vets get over the violence they saw overseas.

dinner at his grandmother's house. She put his plate of lasagna in the microwave.

"I saw it and started crying, and I threw up in the sink," he says. "How many people know what brains look like?" Vance couldn't eat lasagna for two years.

During that time his relationship with the *Dear John* girl imploded. One morning he missed a flight to go on a family vacation because he had blacked out in bed. His mom told him it was time to seek help.

When Vance first opened up to a VA therapist about combat, she responded by sobbing. So much for therapy, he thought. Along with painkillers, the VA gave him

antidepressants and anti-anxiety meds. For a month he felt seasick and disoriented. "I'd rather be an angry maniac and feel like myself," he says. So he threw away the pills, except Xanax for panic attacks. The opiate withdrawals were a nightmare. "It was like *Trainspotting*," he says. "That used to be one of my favorite movies. Now I can't watch it."

**WHEN HE WAS 14**, Vance was an up-and-coming pro muay Thai fighter. By 2007 he'd switched to MMA. He took the fight name Hooligan after earning a reputation for "going overboard" while bouncing at dive bars. By day he was laboring in the sun, laying concrete foundations. In the early evening he'd pound heavy bags at the gym until his knuckles were raw. "I didn't have the energy to go cause a ruckus as often," he recalls. "I didn't have that anger just festering, waiting to pop all the time. It was worked out of me."

Slowly he came out of his shell. Thanks to the GI Bill, he started college in 2008. He went back to therapy, read up on PTSD, and learned how soldiers are biologically adapted to combat. He volunteered at a VA hospital and declared social work his major. Someday, maybe, he'd find a job helping vets.

In 2010 he was working as a trainer at Undisputed and prepping for an MMA fight. He had eight weeks to train but no sparring partner. Looking around the gym, Vance spotted a muscular guy with

can't deprogram them," says MMA legend and Army vet Randy Couture. "You're dealing with a warrior mentality, a spirit that's been conditioned to tactically engage, assess an opponent's strengths and weaknesses. That's MMA to a T."

It stands to reason that combat vets would enjoy MMA. But can tossing a bunch of Rambo's into an arena of aggression really be a better, let alone safer, alternative to quiet their inner demons?

**THE FIRST SIGN** that shit was about to go down was the sound of a vehicle accelerating. Sergeant Vance was pulling guard duty at a base in Mosul, Iraq when he spotted a truck 100 meters out, gunning straight for the gate.

By the time the smoke cleared and the machine guns ceased fire, three suicide truck bombers had attacked. The base itself was safe, but the third truck managed to detonate outside the gate, decimating a dozen U.S. soldiers.

"It's 130 degrees, and it's cooking body parts and guts on the blacktop," Vance tells me, tears welling in his eyes. "Shoveling the soup into body bags, you don't forget that it's people."

That 2004 bombing wasn't an isolated incident. Four soldiers died on Vance's first mission in Samarra, Iraq. All told, he led more than 250 missions and 75 raids in the roughest combat zones. "You're done fighting, and all you see is a pair of trousers or a piece of skull stuck against

the wall," he says. "It's like, fuck, dude, that was my best friend."

Vance enlisted in 1998 at age 17. When he was a few months shy of finishing his service, 9/11 struck, and he reenlisted. Then in 2003, while on leave, he met a girl back home. They spent two weeks falling in love before Vance redeployed. Their complicated long-distance relationship went on to inspire the bestselling novel *Dear John*, which was written by Vance's cousin Nicholas Sparks, the author of several romantic tearjerkers—that became movies, including *The Notebook*. Channing Tatum played Vance in the 2010 film version of *Dear John*.

While he was in Iraq, Vance e-mailed with Sparks every few weeks to update him on the relationship, but he never told him, nor any other member of his family, the ghastly details of combat. Vance kept it all bottled up, worried they would see him differently.

When he got out of the Army for good and returned to San Diego in 2006, he truly was a different person, inside and out. Among the many tattoos Vance collected: a ticking time bomb and FTW (fuck the world).

For six months he went full blast, pounding Seagram's 7, picking fights, and popping painkillers. He was on the edge: Crowds, slammed doors, and aggressive body language triggered a slew of emotions in him. So did seemingly mundane things. One night Vance was late to



Since their launch, Vance's free three-days-a-week workouts have drawn more than 100 combat veterans.

oceanic-themed tat sleeves. Turned out he was an ex-Navy SEAL.

One veteran saw the pair grappling in the cage, then another. Within a month seven vets had joined them. Vance intended to use the guys only as tackling dummies, but they wanted to learn. He started coaching them. After Vance won his big fight by a "vicious knee knockout" (fracturing his own shin and both feet in the process), he returned to Undisputed. The vets wanted to keep training, and he couldn't refuse. Undisputed agreed to let Vance borrow the cage.

**SHANE HANNER**, one of Vance's first students, used to be an outgoing Midwestern teenager. That was before he dropped out of college, joined the Navy in 2004, and deployed to Kuwait at the height of the war. By 2008 Hanner was out of the service and suffering from PTSD and depression. He had few friends and couldn't keep a girlfriend. Mostly he just stayed home alone with the blinds drawn.

Counseling didn't help. Nor did the meds: He was constantly drowsy but unable to sleep for days at a time.

His only comfort was food. Late at night he'd binge on pepperoni pizza and Ben & Jerry's. He gained 35 pounds in six months. As a Navy petty officer, he'd earned top fitness scores. Now his 5'8" frame "looked like a bowling ball."

After catching a UFC fight on TV, he decided to join Undisputed, where half the trainers are pro MMA fighters. For months Hanner saw Vance around the gym, but he was too intimidated to talk to the tattooed hulk—until the summer of 2010, when he noticed Vance working out

with a few guys in brown military-issue T-shirts. It was the beginnings of P.O.W.

Vance took Hanner under his wing, texting and calling him daily to get him to the gym. Vance made Hanner his sparring partner, and before long they were best friends.

"I had no problem confiding in him my darkest secrets," recalls Hanner. "I knew he'd battled the same kind of demons."

Within four months he had dropped 20 pounds. His social anxiety was dissipating, but Hanner wanted more: He dreamed of fighting professionally. "You already put in the hard work," Vance told Hanner before his first jujitsu bout. "The fight is the fun part."

Stepping into the ring, Hanner had butterflies in his stomach. When the ref blew the whistle, he struck like a cobra, locking his opponent in a choke hold. The fight was over in 30 seconds. Hanner advanced to the next round. Then another. He won five fights that day, finishing in second place.

Since then Hanner has entered six jujitsu competitions and placed at all of them. He's also dropped another 25 pounds, sprouted a six-pack, and earned a master's in homeland security. He hopes to graduate to pro MMA fights this year.

It almost doesn't matter what happens in the cage. Vance has already declared his friend the winner.

**"HOW DO I GET** through the gate?" I fire off a text message to Vance.

It's Veteran's Day, and Vance is hosting a BBQ for the P.O.W. crew at a gated community in the desert, 20 miles east of San Diego. I'm running late because I stopped to buy a 12-pack of beer. Showing up empty-handed—today of all days—wouldn't just be tacky. It would be downright un-American.

“We’re basically building an army. This is our new platoon, but our mission is different.”

Vance texts me the four-digit code; I park and walk over to an enclosed pool and picnic area. Twenty or more guys in matching black P.O.W. T-shirts are huddled around a cluster of tables, coolers, and a grill. One of them lets me in.

At first Vance hoped all his P.O.W. students would follow Hanner's trajectory. Most of the "OG crew" from 2010 wound up competing in jujitsu tournaments. But by 2011 word had spread about his special MMA class. Support groups like the Wounded Warrior Project and Veterans Village started sending more vets to P.O.W. Beyond PTSD and alcohol abuse cases, Vance began seeing vets hooked on heroin. Some were homeless. Several were missing limbs. At the BBQ I meet one skinny, baby-faced vet with a leg amputated below the knee. Vance has learned to tailor his MMA classes so vets with all types of disabilities can train.

Ultimately Vance realized that P.O.W. isn't about transforming ex-soldiers into pro hopefuls. It's about providing camaraderie. After every class the vets huddle up, place their hands together, and shout, "Brotherhood!" Many of them socialize regularly and text each other for support.

"The *Fight Club* movie references are a little played out, but we are basically building an army," says Mike Judd, a 30-year-old former Army squad leader.



After every session, the former Soldiers at P.O.W. gather, place their hands together, and shout, "Brotherhood!"

"This is our new unit. This is our new platoon. We're physically fit, we're highly trained, most of us still shoot regularly. But our mission is different."

What is their mission?

"Keep our sanity, stay out of trouble, take care of each other," he says. "That's all that matters."

**JUST AS BRAD Pitt's** full-contact club gave guys a reason to cut their hair short and trim their fingernails, Vance's P.O.W. veterans watch their waistlines and dial back on booze. It doesn't require them to stay sober, just un-hung-over.

"You can't be a shitbag and do this class," says Judd, who used to do "Beer Olympics," in which he'd close down a bar, grab breakfast, and then go balls-to-the-wall again at 6 A.M., when the bar reopened. At the Veteran's Day BBQ, he limited himself to three Bud Lights.

"Medication couldn't do what this class does," Judd explains to me. "It's definitely a body high."

"Once you've lived at the speed of light, it's hard to go back to 55," says Beaux Engelbert, a 29-year-old former Recon Marine with a blond mohawk who enjoys the rush of MMA.

Besides P.O.W., Vance encourages vets to try therapy and yoga. He invites a VA psychologist friend to pass out business cards; calling her direct line cuts the wait time by a month. Vance's new girlfriend, a yoga instructor, teaches free sessions at P.O.W. at least once a month. Beyond poses and postures, she shows the vets breathing techniques to alleviate anxiety.

Finding better ways to fight PTSD is a top priority for the government. During the first half of 2012, more soldiers committed suicide than died in combat in Afghanistan.

Last September the Department of Defense and the VA announced they're investing \$100 million to research new treatments for PTSD and TBI (traumatic brain injury, which results from exposure to repeated explosions). Already the VA has sanctioned alternative therapies like acupuncture, the Buddhist method of "loving-kindness meditation," and neuro-feedback treatments, in which vets monitor their own brain waves on a screen. Outside the VA, doctors are exploring even more radical approaches, including marijuana and ecstasy.

"Nothing works for everybody. There are many alternatives. The question is the same: Where's the beef?" says Matthew Friedman, M.D., executive director of the VA's National Center for PTSD. The beef he's referring to is scientific research. "I'm not going to make a recommendation for a treatment that hasn't been validated."

Currently researchers are beginning to investigate the effects of martial arts on PTSD. In time a program like P.O.W. could be legitimized. Either way, Vance is sticking to his mission. He just needs to lock down funding to make P.O.W. his full-time job. Eventually, he envisions franchising P.O.W. across the country, but for now he just needs a bigger cage—that 24-foot one is getting crowded.

"I was a squad leader in the Army. Not having that role is boring to me," he says. "I need people counting on me." ■

## SUPER TROOPERS SPORTS STARS WHO WORE STRIPES.



**ROGER STAUBACH**  
Navy  
NFL Hall of Famer  
Captain America didn't earn his nickname during his tour in Vietnam with the Navy. Rather, it refers to Staubach's leading "America's Team," the Dallas Cowboys, to five Super Bowl appearances.



**RANDY COUTURE**  
Army  
Six-time UFC champ  
After serving six years in the military, eventually reaching the rank of sergeant in the 101st Airborne, Couture took his talents into the UFC Octagon, where he won six different championship titles.



**DAVID ROBINSON**  
Navy  
NBA Hall of Famer  
Having started his basketball career playing at the Naval Academy, and learning that his height would restrict him from active duty, the seven-footer landed at center with the San Antonio Spurs.



**ROCKY BLEIER**  
Army  
NFL  
After being drafted by the Steelers, the fullback was drafted again—into the Army in 1968. Doctors told him he'd never play football again after suffering a leg injury in Vietnam. Rocky proved them wrong.



**KEN NORTON SR.**  
USMC  
Heavyweight boxing champ  
Ken Norton began his boxing career while enlisted in the Marine Corps and finished it as one of only five people to have ever defeated Muhammad Ali in his professional career.



**PAT TILLMAN**  
Army  
NFL  
An All-Pro safety for the Arizona Cardinals, Tillman opted to enlist in the Army following the 9/11 attacks. He was deployed to Iraq and later Afghanistan, where his life tragically ended as a result of friendly fire.