

## Going The Distance

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**Video Link:** <http://www.brainline.org/content/multimedia.php?id=2131>

### [Music]

**Bob Woodruff:** On January 29, 2006 while reporting from Iraq, my cameraman Doug Vogt and I were wounded by a roadside bomb.

### [Sound Effects]

I nearly died but I got the best military and civilian military care in the world. I was very, very lucky.  
Jay Waller

I was knocked unconscious with whatever they hit me with and had they left then, I probably would be a physician today. But that is when they continued to stomp on my head against the pavement while I was unconscious. I lived so I don't know what my mission on this earth is but there's a reason why I'm still here and I guess I have to figure out what my mission in life is.

**Jason Poole:** The day I got hurt, we had gone on a patrol. We got hit with a massive, massive bomb. I was lying on the ground, I had blood all over my face and I said, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," boom and then I was out.

**David Poole:** They never really told us the extent of the injuries. We didn't find out until much later that a piece of shrapnel went through his face and came out right below his eye and shattered his face. It was just all this craziness; he was in a coma, just overwhelming news.

### [Music]

**Jason Poole:** The Marine recruiters came to my school. One of the recruiters he was just like, "Hey man how would you like to join the Marine Corp?"

**David Poole:** The way he presented it to me is like this was going to be a great adventure.

**Jason Poole:** And on September 11th it happened.

### [Sound Effects]

It's like the whole world has changed. I was like, "Oh shit. We're going to war."

### [Music]

### [Sound Effects]

**Jay Waller:** I graduated from Yale University Pre-Med in 1995, decided to go to Hawaii on vacation and was assaulted and put into a coma for just less than a month, and have been living with a brain injury ever since.

### [Music]

**David Poole:** I walked into the room and then you just see a lifeless body that is my brother. He's in a bed with a machine breathing for him, his face swollen out to here, his tongue was out, he had tubes coming out of everything, a tube in his throat you know and he was just lifeless.

**Lisa Poole:** I'm in bed and like crying my eyes out that night. I was crying like a baby next to him holding his hands, talking to him, just getting it all over with and then the next day I was like right okay go be hard core now.

**David Poole:** I walked up to Jason's room at late night, nobody else was there. I was just holding his hand and I just remember I was just crying. I was just like you're going to be okay, just push through this.

**Lisa Poole:** From that point on, I never thought that he was going to die because I knew that he couldn't because I would kick his ass, he could not die.

**Jay Waller:** My mother had gotten that 4:30 a.m. phone call--"Mrs. Waller, Jay's been involved in an accident. You need to get here as fast as you can." When I think about how amazing my family is. Now what they went through was 100 times worst than what I went through. It was painful for everybody not to even know if I was going to live; but then if I was to survive, is Jay going to be able to walk, is he going to be able to talk?

**Lee Woodruff:** The phone rang and the voice said, "Lee this is Davy Weston," who is the President of ABC News and my heart sort of stopped. I knew that this wasn't good. When we got to the hospital there were just so many doctors I just remembered thinking all of these people are caring for Bob; it was ENT's, it was the neurosurgeon; it was the general surgeon.

**Lt. Col Rocco Armonda, MD:** When Bob first arrived here he was in a semi-comatose state, he was not following commands.

**Jason Poole:** My first memories in Bethesda, I just woke up and I looked up and I was like, "What's all this? Who are these people? Where am I?"

**Lisa Poole:** I remember the first time I knew that he was okay, he looked at me when I knew that he just said what's wrong, and I'm like, "What are you kidding me dud? You're kidding me. You've been like to the brink of death and back and you're asking me what's wrong."

**Jay Waller:** I had introduced myself to my sister; I didn't even know who she was. I'd say, "Hi I'm Jay, nice to meet you." And then she'd say, "Hi, I'm Wendy Waller," and I'd say, "Oh shoot I should have known that." I couldn't really talk that well but apparently I asked my nurse to marry me; and that's when my family knew that Jay's coming back.

**Lee Woodruff:** I walked in the room and I parted the curtain and Bob was sitting up in bed and he turned to me and he said, "Sweetie, where have you been?" Just like that and I think I rushed over to him and I gave him a big kiss and then I thought okay where do I begin.

**David Woodruff:** I picked up the phone and it was Lee and she said, "Dave I'm here with your brother in the hospital and we've had a little bit of a miracle. He's awake, he's talking, he's asking what happened to him.

**Lee Woodruff:** What do you think big Dave?

**David Woodruff:** And I couldn't believe it.

**Harriet Zeiner, PhD:** Jason arrived at Palo Alto VA on a gurney. He was not capable of sitting up; he didn't have the trunk strength to even sit up in a chair and he wasn't communicating at all. He didn't have the consistent yes or no, wasn't nodding and indicating yes and no.

**Jason Poole:** I was just like, "How are you? So are you okay with the war?" It was just like I didn't have--comprehension but after a month, month and a half when I started to learn everything--"How do you like the war?"

**Harriet Zeiner, PhD:** There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that because of his brain injury Jason suffers more pain and suffering than the rest of us do in confronting life. The cell fat was before the blast is forever gone. The blast had taken part of his skull. He had lost an eye and an ear.

**Jason Poole:** I'm deaf in my left ear; I'm blind in my left eye; I have shrapnel all over my body; and my right arm has got shrapnel. Before my accident I was a little hot boy. I was very English and I had many girlfriends. They tell me that my accent is very sexy; but after the blast and I woke up and I looked in the mirror I saw the ugliest person I ever saw and it was me. The blast smashed all of the bones in my face; I couldn't see the old Jason.

**Harriet Zeiner, PhD:** This had been a formally handsome, attractive, physically fit, funny, heart of the party kind of guy. He had a fiancee, he was going to marry her and they were very much in love. The Jason who came back was very different.

**David Poole:** Jason getting hurt I know was extremely hard for Michelle. I know she cried a lot. I didn't really talk to her about why she couldn't be with him but I understood how hard it was for her, and I still understand how hard it is for her.

**Harriet Zeiner, PhD:** They have remained friends but that was another wound for Jason--a wound after he had survived the blast.

### **[Music]**

**Jay Waller:** The hardest part for me is the fact that I didn't even know that I had a disability. I was told it was my disability itself that inhibited me from seeing the fact that I had a disability. You make excuses for yourself, you rationalize, you justify, you do all these things; but I look fine, I sound fine, but people just don't understand.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** The Jason you see that looks like a regular guy is the result of nine surgeries to put bone plates back in to give him a round head shape, to reconstruct part of the face that was damaged; he has an artificial eye but to make the two eyes match, his other eye, the one that works, had a lot of scarring and drooping.

**Jason Poole:** I looked in the mirror, I know I'm not a hot boy, but you look normal, you look okay.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** The acceptance of how he looked was a part of giving him the world back.

**Jay Waller:** I had to re-teach myself how to walk, how to talk; I went through speech therapy, I went through physical therapy; I went through occupational therapy; I really just kind of regained the activities of daily living.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** The task of someone with a significant brain injury is to re-invent who they are; to acknowledge the disabilities in order to be able to compensate around them.

**Jay Waller:** I can remember that I was a good athlete and I can remember how I swung a tennis racket. I can remember exactly how I served. Probably ten minutes later I went out to play tennis with my sister, I could not hit the ball. I whiffed on everything. It was so frustrating--I am doing this just how I always used to why is it not working?

**Jason Poole:** Being--aw dude--I'm sorry man. No problem, no problem. Being a TBI aw dude I can't remember--the left side of my brain is damaged so reading, writing, spelling, talking, is very, very difficult for me to do. So I'm attach [assumed spelling]...

**Therapist:** Pennelton [assumed spelling]?

**Jason Poole:** Yeah. I tried to read like from a third-year old book and that book was so hard for me to read.

**Therapist:** M-I-R.

**Jason Poole:** Mar.

**Therapist:** Mirror, mirror.

**Jason Poole:** Mirror?

**Therapist:** Mirr-ah-bell.

**Jason Poole:** Mirrah-bell. It's just Mirabelle.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** Now he's reading but he's reading at about a fourth grade level and very slowly, and it's not going to be enough in the near future to be able to go to college to become the teacher that he wanted to be.

**Therapist:** How do you write a paragraph?

**Jason Poole:** Well for the first thing you have to write a topic but...

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** You've now seen him five years post injury where he's literally worked five days a week for five years; and to a certain extent Jason has become almost a poster child or recovery from traumatic brain injury for people returning from this conflict because he has this spirit that I'm going to have what's important in life. I'm going to make it meaningful; whatever it takes I'm going to do it.

**Jason Poole:** For the first time when I took a bus by myself, I was just waiting for number 23, I'm pretty nervous okay but I forgot like all the locations so that means we went down the bus by like a mile, past a mile and I said, "Wait, I'm wrong okay, so then I had to get off the bus, cross the street and wait for the bus to wait to come over here.

**Jay Waller:** I needed to train my brain I guess if you will, to learn how to remember, short term memory loss was pretty...

**Interviewer:** Severe?

**Jay Waller:** Severe yes. They would show you pictures of a rhinoceros, an elephant, a dog, a pillow and I can remember looking at them and there was one of them I couldn't get the name; and she'd be like

that would be an elephant. Gosh I should have known that.

**Therapy Sessions with Bob Woodruff:** Pill bottle, candle with a wick.

What's this one called? It's an H...

Oh yeah, hammer.

Yep.

Hammer. H-a-m-o-r. Hammer--H-a-m-m-e-r, hammer.

**Bob Woodruff with Family:** Belt buckle.

Belt burrow.

Belt buckle.

Bet buckle.

Belt.

Belt.

Bout.

Bout.

No Nora you're confusing him. Belt.

Belt.

Buckle.

Buckle.

Buckle.

Belt. Buckle.

Buckle. Belt buckle. You taught me belt buckle. You did it.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** One of the effects of the blast is the line between what's a private thought and what's a public thought and it essentially disappeared. He had a thought and it would drop like a gumball onto his tongue and just roll right out. That gets people into problems.

**Jay Waller:** People see me, they hear me talk, I can remember certain things, I look completely normal, completely normal, but when you get an idea you just say it but it might not be the most appropriate time to say that. So it comes across as something insulting and then you lose friends.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** In order for someone with a brain injury to be able to be in the world and have meaningfulness and joyfulness, the environment has to be somewhat more limited in order to match the

capacities; and where that limitation, that buffering occurs is usually family and friends doing some of the protecting. I think the concept of the buffer; a loving buffer is a crucial one.

**Lisa Poole:** Your family and friends are your support. They're the ones that lift you higher so you need them to keep on pushing and keep on believing to make in our case Jason, strong. Not that Jason needs our help because he is strong but we'd always be there; we wouldn't let him down but we'd always be there for him and stay positive. All Jason has to do is look at me and I'll laugh because I can tell by his eyes what he's thinking.

**David Poole:** And as you can see, you see that little scruff under his chin, he's pretty much been growing it since he was hurt and that's all that's been grown.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** His goal was to use his GI benefits and after he returned to become a kindergarten teacher. He has a special affinity with children. He really enjoys them; he sort of considers a part of himself a big kid, he communicates really well with him. So one of the things that Jason did was to volunteer at the Whistle Stop which is the VA's child care.

**Jason Poole:** The kids are so cute. We actually played games; outside we would play hide and go seek or tag. It makes me feel a kid again. It's really fulfilling.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** They adore him and he's wonderful with them and you can see the calling. You can see that he would have been a fabulous teacher and he's had parts of the dream come back.

**Jay Waller:** Your life is not over and it is positive and will be and it can be positive and you can still achieve, you can still be successful at whatever you put your mind too. Going to medical school was probably not an option so that door closed; but I can go back to school.

**Angela Eastman:** When I first met Jason Poole, I remember seeing this guy peeking his head around the corner. You could tell that he was shy and I was like, "Hello", and he was like, "Hi" and I like introduced myself and said, "Hi, I'm Angela," and he said, "Hello, I'm Jason, Jason Poole."

**Jason Poole:** I was very shy and it's like yeah ah I'm scared. I was very timid.

**Angela Eastman:** He started talking to me about how he got hurt in Iraq and he was showing me his like scars.

**Jason Poole:** In my brain I would like think of the words to say but this mouth it was not saying.

**Angela Eastman:** We hung out we talked, and we went dancing. Jason loved to dance; I loved to dance so he had asked me would you be interested in going out with me. And I was like well I wasn't sure because I knew that he had a brain injury and he didn't drive. I said, "Yes I'll go out with you. Let's give it a try."

**David Poole:** He just came back all excited talking about, "Yeah me and this girl we were dancing all night long. I think I like her."

**Jason Poole:** I was like 10 years old and I was just like, "Can I--do you want to be my girlfriend?" It was good and she said yes so we started to hang out.

**Angela Eastman:** And then like he kissed me and it was like magical because when he kissed me I felt like all this electric static, like I don't even know if you'd call it static but like you feel like an explosion in your body like it felt so nice. So I'm going to feed you.

**Jason Poole:** Good.

**Angela Eastman:** I'll give you a sub. What impressed me about Jason so much with him struggling to regain what he's lost. He was so positive about it. You could see him struggling. He would start with a sentence and I had a habit of filling in the words that he was missing and he was like aw babe just let me finish, let me finish and then he would forget. Like he was trying so hard to be the 100% man that he could be like he was before his injuries.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** Oh there's your phone.

**Jason Poole:** That's Angela I'm sorry. Hello.

**Angela Eastman:** Hey I forgot to remind you make sure you wash your hands all day today okay?

**Jason Poole:** Okay baby.

**Angela Eastman:** With that swine flu, like if you touch things make sure you wash your hands.

**Jason Poole:** Okay baby.

**Angela Eastman:** I just want to remind you because I just thought about it. I know you. Okay?

**Jason Poole:** Yes baby.

**Angela Eastman:** Love you babe.

**Jason Poole:** Love you too.

**Angela Eastman:** Okay, bye-bye.

**Jason Poole:** Bye. I was just like baby have a great time and I really love you and so then I got her a ring and I was like, "Will you marry me?" and she was like "Oh yes," and so then she was crying so loud.

**Angela Eastman:** I didn't see it coming and I just started crying I was like, "Oh yes." I think as a TBI spouse the number one importance is to have a support system. You need to have support because if you don't have any support, you're just going to get depressed and you're not going to see recoveries from people in one night. It takes time; just be patient and take your time and be supportive and don't be so quick to just ah I give up.

**Jason Poole:** On Memorial Day I think about the war and the friends who passed on. It's really sad but I made it. I'm just glad.

**Angela Eastman:** So Monday we're going to have barbeque and remember those who have passed on and be grateful that Jason is still here--like I say grow old with Jason.

**Jason Poole:** We're going to get married and have some kids and I'm going to live old and that to me is perfect.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** His motto is "Nothing keeps me down" and he has lots of heart. He wants to give a message of resilience to others who were injured.

**Jason Poole:** I've done water rafting in the Grand Canyon. It obviously was amazing.

**Sarah Williams:** Jason is an absolute delight--an absolute delight from the first time he talked but the change has been incredible and what I would say is a very, very timid young man coming onto this trip. Jason now is at the front of the boat, he's in the middle of everything. He's unloading the boat. He's washing the dishes.

**Jason Poole:** Like when I wake up in the morning and I've got to like put all this stuff together and basically I did it all myself and I put it all back together so I said yes I did it. Basically that's why I'm here. For four years actually I've been going to Aspen, Colorado to go snowboarding. The award is for the courageous veteran who helps like more like patients or other veterans, 600 people were in there. Jason Poole and I was like what the--I was like that's me? So then I had to walk up and everybody was just standing up clapping. It was just an amazing night, an amazing night.

**[Music]**

**David Poole:** Jason is always going to be the person that inspires. He's inspiring those people in the VA to have a lot more help because he's just like, "Hey look how far I've come. I've got my own house, got my own woman. Just don't worry about it." And he just makes people realize that they have lots of potential and makes them realize they can do whatever they want to do if they put their heart into it.

**Harriet Zeiner PhD:** You'll be away from family. For me, working with Jason allows me to use everything I ever learned as a therapist and he continually surprises me and intrigues me. It's a very spiritual as well as an emotional intimate relationship.

**Bob Woodruff:** How are you my friend? How are you doing?

**Injured Soldier:** Good how are you.

**Bob Woodruff:** Do you remember anything that happened?

**Jay Waller:** Due to Bob Woodruff's very successful broadcasting life, he has touched a lot of people, people know him, his injury combined with who he is and who he's built himself to be. I would love to be able to touch as many people as he can through his work and through his book, his wife's book. I think that he is an extraordinary man; I look forward to meeting him. I know that we will have a bond certainly just for the sheer fact that we are brain injury survivors. It's sort of a brotherhood or a sisterhood and somebody can understand the same struggles as you have. It's an added comfort to know that someone else can feel what you feel.

**[Music]**

I'm now in a Doctorate program in physical therapy. That's perfect for me. Physical therapy is a huge, huge component of brain injury rehabilitation. Maybe all things do happen for a reason. I was able to discover my true path.

**[Jason Poole Talking In Background]**

**Jason Poole:** My advice to TBI survivors well first off I have my positive attitude. It's just like the first year, first year and a half it's a struggle. But you know what? Just work, just work, work, work, just try to be the best that you can. Like a couple of years down the road and a couple are going to be better.