

Good morning/afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I'd like to start by thanking you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Austin Lambright, and I am here from South Carolina. In 2006, at 19 years old, I enlisted in the Marine Corps. I served as a Machine Gunner for two deployments to Iraq. I was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in 2010 at the rank of Corporal.

During my time in the Marine Corps, I completely engulfed myself in the mentality of going to combat at the peak of two wars and in the harshest conditions possible. I earned my combat action ribbon at the ripe age of 19, just a kid that felt nearly invincible. I had a purpose and driven focus for my life, with support from loved ones at home that projected me into a successful Marine and Squad Leader on my second deployment. Both of my deployments to combat zones.

When I transitioned out of the Marine Corps, I moved back to my hometown Easley, South Carolina. I was somewhat of a reckless wrecking ball at first - mad at the world for my experiences, outcomes, and the current state of Americans in my generation. In 18 months time, I had been arrested three times for Driving Under the Influence, went to jail multiple times due to violence, and had an unexpected child.

During this time, one of my Marines committed suicide. Another one of my Marines had chosen suicide while on deployment in our living quarters. Suicide became an option in the back of my mind.

My child gave me a new purpose and made suicide feel like I would leave my son alone. This was a turning point in my life, and when I became connected with Upstate Warrior Solution. I began reaching out for help to better myself as a father for my son, and I quickly made common connections with the other veterans at UWS. I found commonality of mindset, felt as if I was not alienated in the general public, and was able to be real about my problems and gain advice from those who have experienced and overcome similar struggles.

I learned that I am not invincible by any means, and my choices and decisions moving forward would directly influence my way of life and leadership for my son. This was a key period in my journey that really turned the course positive. Without it, I would have been suicidal and landed myself in prison or the grave, surely enough had I continued down the road I was on before my son was born and connecting with UWS.

As time progressed, I went through a divorce and job changes that really got me in the dumps at times. In these times, I would reach out to UWS for support and keep my head on straight. I was invited to and participated in golf tournaments, dinners, hikes, and other events that gave me a sense of a positive community that I could take pride in being a part of.

In October of 2022, Upstate Warrior Solution helped me get connected to the Vet Center for mental health counseling. I was in one of my darkest ruts, suicidal for months. In February 2023, I reached out to Upstate Warrior Solution for help again and agreed to participate in the Staff Sergeant Fox Program. As a Staff Sergeant Fox participant, I received in-patient and outpatient care from both VA facilities and non-VA facilities. I received care for PTSD and alcohol abuse, with a lot of time and focus spent on post combat stress and my personal experiences. I also participated in Upstate Warrior Solutions' recreation program and received peer support from them.

I also want to note that I have always claimed to be a Christian man since I was saved at 12 years old. However, I had never truly followed the lifestyle and choices that Jesus directed by his actions and words. Last year in April of 2024, I was rebaptized in the presence of my son and mother and father, and my life has drastically changed. Seeing God's purpose for my life and putting all my focus and energy on that cause for myself has been life changing for the better.

The care and help that I received through the Staff Sergeant Fox Program saved my life. I had been out of the Marine Corps for 12 years before I asked for help. It took me 12 years to get to my rock bottom, and at that rock bottom was the untouched trauma that I experienced while in the Marine Corps and the losses I have experienced since that time as well. Loss of veteran friends, loss of marriage, loss of purpose.

For over two years, my mental health and wellbeing were made a priority by the VA, Upstate Warrior Solution, and my community but, most importantly, by me. I exited the Staff Sergeant Fox program in April of this year.

When families, friends, local organizations, and fellow veterans actively participate in creating a supportive environment, it helps build a strong network of care and understanding. This sense of connection and shared responsibility can make a profound difference, reminding veterans that they are not alone and that our lives matter.

Completing the program gave me the tools to not only take better care of myself, but to be there for my brothers and sisters in arms. I'm proud to have taken that step—because asking for help is a strength, not a weakness. I think the program should not only be continued, but be expanded to reach those who struggle with similar issues as myself.

Thanks and God bless.

