

BILL CZYZEWSKI: VETERAN, HAND CYCLIST, ADVOCATE

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If you ever thought you couldn't make it up a hill, you need to meet Bill.



LAST JUNE, BILL CZYZEWSKI and his trusty bike, affectionately nicknamed 'Pinky,' climbed eight miles, while conquering 5-8% grades, to summit Colorado's nearly 12,000 foot Loveland Pass. What makes this impressive feat extraordinary is the fact that 'Pinky' is a hand cycle and Bill is a disabled Vietnam Vet.

As a participant in the 2012 Sea to Shining Sea ride, organized by World T.E.A.M. Sports, Czyzewski and 13 other disabled veterans rode 3,700 miles from San Francisco to Virginia Beach in 60 days, raising awareness, changing perceptions, and conquering physical and mental barriers along the way—proving the organization's T.E.A.M. moniker, that The Exceptional Athlete (does) Matter.

Several times while climbing that pass Bill was ready to give up, but teamwork and raw determination powered him when his arms were ready to quit.

"Many times going up the pass I didn't think I was going to make it and finally something kicked in; the motivation to get up just took over," Czyzewski recently told SPOKES. "People were looking at me like they couldn't believe I did it. It was an inspiration to them AND to me. It let me know what I could do."

This revelation, this journey, has ignited a passion in Bill to help other vets—to let them know that while war might have wounded them, they have dreams yet

to be dreamed, accomplishments yet to be achieved and, most importantly, that they are not alone.

Bill's own journey that began so many years ago when a bullet pierced his upper leg, severely damaging the circulation and making the leg useless, took another life-altering turn 40 years later when a friend introduced him to the hand cycle.

Interested in improving his fitness, in early 2010 he requested, and received, a hand cycle from his local Veteran Affairs Medical Center in Martinsburg, W.Va.

Taking to it "like a fish to water," the Bunker Hill, West Virginia resident started frequenting the nearby track at Musselman High School. At times, though, he would find the gate locked and needed to drive farther to find an available track. That changed when a worker at the school came out and handed him a key to the back gate saying, "Anyone like you who wants to come here and use the track is more than welcome."

One day while cycling his normal six to 12-mile training ride, Bill was asked if he was training for the Sea to Shining Sea ride. He wasn't at that point and didn't even know about the ride, but his interest was piqued.

Discovering it was a ride for vets, Bill tracked their progress online and decided to meet the group when they came in to Chambersburg, Pa. That's where Bill

met Paul Bremer, then president and CEO of World T.E.A.M. Sports and the former U.S. Administrator to Iraq.

Impressed that he'd only been riding six months but eager to take on the challenge of their ride, Bremer invited Bill to meet them the next day in Emmitsburg, Md., for the ride into D.C.

Like many novices who are used to trails, Bill hadn't realized road riding would feel much different.

"I get out there, I'm rip-roaring ready to go at 5:30 in the morning and all of a sudden reality came up to me and said 'hey, guess what? We have hills out here for you! And you've never been on them!' So I did about nine miles out of Emmitsburg and I told them to put me in the sag, all I'm doing is holding you guys back. I'll pick up my leg and go home."

But when the sag van got him to his car in Frederick, Md., they urged him to stay on to ride the final portion.

"They tell me, the last eight miles into DC is fairly easy. We want you to ride with us. I said, you guys have been riding all this way, I'm not riding into DC and stealing your guys' thunder."

Bremer told Bill not to worry about that and told him they wanted him along.

"So I rode along in my truck to the last water stop and joined them on the bike at that point. Before I knew it, I had an Army guy on one side and a Navy guy on the other holding onto the back seat of my bike and pushing me up hills. Far out! We get outside Walter Reed (Army Medical Center) and I see a hill, a quarter mile, half mile long. I give it the gas, but sure enough I start sliding back. I see these two guys out of the corner of my eye coming up and I hear somebody in the back holler 'leave Bill alone, this is his hill!' and that was Paul Bremer. And that gave me the gas. I just went right on up."

Bill was hooked. That was in July 2010; by April the next year he was taking part in the Face of America ride, another World T.E.A.M. Sports event. The two-day, 110-mile ride from the Pentagon to Gettysburg solidified Bill's realization that these events were life changing, and not just for him.

The Face of America ride ends at the late Seamus Garrahy's Gettysburg farm. Garrahy was a retired marine who believed "if anybody wants to know what America is about, they should be on that land." Having taken part in the ride, Bill believes "if anybody wants to know what America is about, BE on the ride. To ride with these American heroes is an honor."

With one event under his belt, Bill looked for other opportunities to challenge himself. In September 2011 he was honored to take part in Ride2Recovery's 10th Anniversary 9/11 Ride. Participants rode 500 miles from New York to the Pentagon with a stop in Shanksville, Pa., along the way. Ride2Recovery hosts different challenge events but that one in particular meant a lot to him—a Vietnam veteran riding in support of the veterans returning now.

Two more Ride2Recovery events furthered Bill's training. Bill followed up the 9/11 ride with the Florida Challenge in October, riding 480 miles from Jacksonville to Tampa. He continued to train in the





winter as best he could and in March 2012 he participated in the Gulf Coast Challenge, riding 450 miles from New Orleans to Tallahassee. Even though he knows it's flat, Bill is proud to note it as the first ride where he didn't need to hop on the sag vehicle at any point. Propelling yourself with just your arms and upper body is exceedingly difficult and hand cycles will have poles attached so the riders can get assists along the way from someone pushing during strenuous portions.

The Gulf Coast Challenge was no different, but what

was different was Bill's strength. This particular ride paired Bill with a designated assist rider but "there would be times when I'd be riding along and I'd look back and he'd have his elbow on the pole. I said, 'Hey Bob, am I pulling you?' And he said, 'Well, Bill, as a matter of fact, sometimes you are. And it feels good.'"

A month later in April, Bill participated again in the DC to Gettysburg Face of America ride but he was already itching to test himself further and hoping World T.E.A.M. Sports would put on another Sea to Shining Sea Ride—after all that was the ride that had

started him on this journey two years earlier and he wanted to participate in the full event, not just the last eight miles. Checking vigilantly, Bill signed up within five minutes of the ride being posted online.

The one thing Bill really wanted in preparation for the 60-day, cross-country ride was a lighter bike. He'd been riding on a 60-pound bike and he knew that would be a challenge for him and anyone assisting.

About a week before the ride start in May, World T.E.A.M. Sports called and told him they had a bike for him. The only problem is that it was bright pink! Bill quickly got over any concerns he had with the color—this new 30-pound bike would not only help him, but "save the pushers" as Bill is well aware it's hard on them, too.

The biggest assist Bill would get came early in the ride up Loveland Pass. That morning Bill was greeted by ride director Mike Claver. As Bill remembers it, Mike told him, "We've got poles, we've got people, you're not going in the bus, you're going to ride it."

Claver went on to write an essay recounting that day and its significance in a commemorative book given

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to participants. He titled the essay “The Mountains in Life’s Path” and compares Bill’s injury and his subsequent decision seven years later to amputate his useless leg to the literal mountain that lay in front of them.

“Imagine having to face that decision,” Claver wrote. “That decision is a mountain in your path and the gauntlet being thrown down—you can get around it, go through it, or get over it, but you will have to do it with one less leg.

“Fast forward to June 20, 2012, the mountain stood tall and proud on a cloudless day, cool and crisp—nothing like that March day [in 1971 when Bill was wounded]. Since the beginning, I had watched Bill turn that crank of his hand bike, a fabulous device for a guy like him. The only problem with Bill’s bike was the fact that someone had painted it flaming pink.

“Powered only by Bill’s arms and upper body, you can’t stand and let gravity push the pedals down. Requires arms like Popeye and the stamina of a draft horse. My fervent wish for him was to make that climb; I knew it would give him a renewed sense of purpose and dignity. I knew it was nearly impossible without help so I hatched the idea of a 3-person team to help push, perhaps my best idea in years.

“Today was going to be Bill’s day, he just didn’t know it. ‘Bill, you’re going to climb this mountain, stay in the saddle,’ I commanded. His look of apprehension was priceless. In 1970 we walked different paths, but today we walked together.”

Bill’s accomplishment that day was meaningful for everyone involved because it was a team effort. It’s this camaraderie that Bill finds so meaningful and important to share with other returning vets.

“When on the ride, you’re not alone and that’s an important feeling,” he told SPOKES.

“You still have the camaraderie when you’re out there on the ride and it’s very therapeutic. These guys coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq and they’re all screwed up. Bicycling helps. It helped me out with my PTSD; I’ve had it for 43 years.”

As the only Vietnam Vet on the ride Bill wants to inspire the older vet as well.

“If they see me out there hauling myself up a hill, maybe they’ll think they can do it, too.”

He firmly believes it would help others, just as it’s helped him, both psychologically and physically.

“I’ve seen a guy missing two legs and one arm and he’s out there on a hand cycle. We’re averaging 60, 70, 80 miles a day and he’s out there. These vets that come back home disabled and don’t think they can do anything—this helps them mentally and physically.”

Bill still has problems, even now, with his prosthetic leg but says he’s “happiest when I’m on that bike. It’s the only time my leg doesn’t bother me because I don’t wear my leg when I ride; the leg sits behind me.”

Along with the physical accomplishments of conquering the terrain and completing his first century in record heat, Bill soaked up the experience. He didn’t start travelling until he got his bike and every trip is a chance “to see the country I fought for.”

The Sea to Shining Sea Ride rode through 14 states and one place in particular stood out for him. “Olney, Illinois was the place we got the most patriotism from. Every person in that town must have come out to greet us. These people would come out from their houses waving their little American flags and say, ‘thank you, thank you.’ If that didn’t bring a tear to your heart, you’re not alive. When I saw all these people gathered in front of the firehouse with a big American flag hanging down, I thought, ‘Those are the people I fought for.’”



Bill admits that the time following the rides can be difficult.

“On the rides you’re around people, you’re accomplishing things, and then you get back to your normal life and you miss it, you miss the camaraderie.”

Mementos like the “challenge coins” he’s earned are meaningful reminders of his efforts and experiences. The coins are given by different vet groups and military organizations like the one he proudly showed from the 11th Armored Cavalry, the group he served with in Vietnam.

While hoping for another experience on the Sea to Shining Sea Ride, this time perhaps as a staff member, Bill is preparing for this year’s Face of America Ride in April while mulling over other rides. He says he’d like to get a ride started around by him to help raise money for vets.



Bill Czyzewski may have lost a leg in Vietnam, but cycling has helped him reclaim his spirit. Whatever rides he does, whatever the future holds, one thing is clear: the exceptional athlete does matter.