

# Order of the Purple Wildrag

BY TIM O'BYRNE

**S**terling Bucholz is no stranger to an early breakfast, saddling in the dark, or the echo of rattling floorboards as the first horse is loaded into the stock trailer in the morning. For many months now, Sterling has been drawing wages on the San Cristobal Ranch, a

division of New Mexico's massive Singleton Ranches near Sante Fe. He's green, for sure, and he understands that fact, but since Sterling was bitten with the cowboy bug all he wants to do is learn and pitch in. With a great attitude like that, he should make a decent hand in no time.



NANCY DE SANTIS

Cowboy UP! program developer Rick Iannucci (R) works with recovering U.S. Marine Sterling Bucholz to move a critter around the arena. It was the first time Sterling had worked a cow, so learning to understand the flight zone concept and how to position himself and his horse was an entirely new experience.



**Nancy De Santis, Cowboy UP! Director, presents Sterling Bucholz U.S.M.C./Ret. with a purple wild rag in honor of his graduating the Cowboy UP! program. The purple wild rag was adopted by the Cowboy UP! program in honor of their partnership with the Military Order of the Purple Heart, New Mexico, and to honor a graduate's adoption into the fraternity of cowboys.**

To anyone who tracks the history and evolution of America's great cattle ranches, Singleton Ranches offers an amazing story of the vision of its founder, the late Dr. Henry Singleton, and his family. Dr. Singleton began gathering up ranch properties in New Mexico back in 1986. Like pearls on a string, 29 in all, he created a ranch holding totaling over 1 million acres, with another 165,000 acres leased from the state. Added to that were ranch holdings in California. The operation is complex and diverse, with a successful Quarter Horse breeding and training program, substantial cattle works, and a staff of folks that are fiercely loyal to the brand while finding time and energy to support local academic and ranch community programs. It was into this positive and rock-solid environment that Sterling Bucholz one day found himself. But how he got there is a movie script in itself.

### **THE LONG, DANGEROUS ROAD LESS TRAVELED**

Back in World War II, Sterling's grandfather belonged to a commando group

known as the Marine Raiders, a precursor of sorts to today's multi-branch United States Special Operations Forces. The Raiders routinely operated behind enemy lines, and they often arrived there on rubber watercraft.

"My Grandfather was a great inspiration to me," recalls Sterling, who was raised on the family acreage near Jemez Spring, NM. "And it was because of him that I joined the Military." After a stint in JR ROTC at his high school in nearby Los Alamos, Sterling was soon standing on the 'yellow footprints' at Marine Corps Recruit Depot in Parris Island, SC. The plan was to sign up for Infantry Machine Gunner, which he did and accomplished, and then see where it took him. That was in December, 2000, and his destination became clear not long after September 11, 2001.

"After 9/11, I spent time guarding a Nuclear Weapons Facility in Maine,

and then we were shipped to Iraq," Sterling recalls. It was there, in the thick of the fight while serving with the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, that Sterling was hit by sniper fire. The first shot hit him square in the helmet and spun him around (... "like getting smacked with an aluminum baseball bat" ... he later claimed), but he shook it off and managed to regain control of the machine gun at his post on the back of the Humvee and return fire to protect his unit, an effort that earned him the Navy Marine Corps Commendation Medal. The results of the second sniper shot to the same area were not so easy to shake off.

Airlifted to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, Sterling underwent immediate brain surgery to stabilize and repair his traumatic injuries. "I remember when the second shot hit, I lost my sight, and I remember praying real hard to God to let me

# COWBOY UP! THE BEGINNING

New Mexico's Singleton Ranches is comprised of well over a million acres of cow country. Over the years, they've created a well-respected Quarter Horse breeding program. Here, Sterling Bucholtz's cowboy buddy, Kiowa Cranson, moves some horses around.

The Cowboy UP! program traces its roots back to a moment in time when Rick Iannucci and his friend Steve Price, cowboss of the Bonanza Creek Ranch, were heading back to the ranch with the truck and trailer after a long circle.

"Steve and I realized the progress we had witnessed with the first PTSD-affected Warrior that visited Nancy and I," recalls Rick. "After we got this young man ahorseback he just kept showing up through Spring works, and by fall we noticed an amazing recovery and transformation that had come over him just by cowboying with us at Bonanza Creek."

That conversation in the truck during the drive back to the ranch was the Ahaa! moment that set the wheels in motion for the future of the program.



get my vision back, because I really needed it right about then (he recounts that part with a warrior's knowing chuckle), and almost like a miracle (within a few minutes) it began to get gray, and then it got lighter, and then suddenly I could see." Regaining his sight that quickly and realizing he was still alive was the very first step in a long, arduous road to recovery, one that would eventually lead him back to his beloved New Mexico and, in a new beginning he couldn't possibly have imagined, ahorseback on a circle with a crew of hard-core cowpunchers surrounded by the pristine beauty of the San Cristobal Ranch.

## COWBOY UP!

The United States Army Special Forces, whom many of us know as the Green Berets, requires its members to live up to a certain expectation. Rick Iannucci made the cut, and after his service with the Snake Eaters, he spent 20 years as a US Marshal. But a big part of Rick's generous heart has always been rooted to the serenity of working with horses, for obvious reasons given a decades-long career in which serenity was about as rare as an Alaskan rattlesnake. Upon retirement from service, Rick found himself in a position to give back from his small Sante Fe

area Crossed Arrows Ranch. He and Sterling were destined cross paths.

"Horses for Heroes, and our enhanced program, Cowboy UP! (*Editor: think Horses for Heroes on a gallon of sweet feed*), was first established here in Santa Fe in June 2007," Rick relates. "It was inspired by the April 2007 US Army program that was established in Fort Meyers, VA, by the Caison Platoon assigned to Arlington Cemetery using their Caison horses to assist wounded active duty soldiers out of Walter Reed Hospital." The North American Handicapped Riding Association provided some instructors who had worked with handicapped

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# Cowboy Physiotherapy

**R**ecovering from a massive injury such as the one that changed Cpl. Sterling Bucholz's life is no easy task. The working ranching world certainly has its share of miracle stories usually involving livestock, vehicle or equipment accidents. But this time, in a welcome twist, the ranching world is on the recovery end.

As Sterling was progressing through the Cowboy UP! program, designed to prepare him for some serious day work on New Mexico's cattle ranches, he found it difficult to involve his left arm and hand in the process.

"My injury caused the left side of my body to kind of go partially paralyzed for awhile," Sterling explains. "I remember sitting in my hospital bed looking at my left hand and asking it to make a fist, but my brain had somehow lost connection with it. Then one day, after about the thousandth time I asked it, my hand finally closed on its own. Of course, I had to pry it open, but it was a start, and we were all pretty happy about it."

Fast forward to Sterling in the arena at the Crossed Arrows Ranch of Rick Iannucci and his fiancée Nancy. Rick had been building up Sterling's skills and confidence, and he knew that one day the young veteran was gonna have to get that left hand involved or he'd never be able to rope anything.

"I watched the other cowboys, how they would rein and choke up with their left hand while building a loop and Rick urged me to get to work on regaining more control of my left arm, so I got started."

Arena work wasn't the only cowboy physiotherapy available on the outfit. Fencing proved to be an excellent exercise as well. "Rick and I were fencing one afternoon, and he was showing me how to work the pliers and wire, and he notices, 'Hey, fencing is good therapy for you because you have to use both hands equally'. So, that's when we got the idea to start up a sister organization called Fencing For Heroes. We'll probably get a hundred phone calls on the first day from ranchers wanting to 'help out' by getting a vet to come fix fence."

and autistic kids to provide guidance to the soldiers who were conducting the training.

"A friend of ours, Christina Savitsky who, along with her husband Ethan, manages the Pecos Bar X Ranch here in Pecos, NM, initially called me and told me about what the Army was doing and asked if I thought we could do it here. I said yes, and we started working on putting a program together. We got started in the spring of 2009, and by Veterans day we hosted our first Cowboy Clinic."

It was at this point that the road forked. After the success of that first Cowboy Clinic, Rick and his volunteer crew decided to create the Cowboy UP! program, and it soon took top billing on the offering of their non-profit 501(c)(3).

"We kept the *Horses for Heroes* name since we had been using it for some time, and it had appeared in the media already (NOTE: *there are several Horses for Heroes entities across the country, it's a bit confusing*), so we trade-

(Below) (L to R) Grant Mitchell, Bill Mitchell, Garnis Hagen and Sterling Bucholz discuss the works on the San Cristobal Ranch. It didn't take long for Sterling to fit right in with this group of gracious cowboys/mentors.



marked it in New Mexico,” Rick explains. “During this same time we were endorsed by the Military Order of the Purple Heart here in New Mexico, and our request for endorsement was ratified with the New Mexico Cattle Growers’ Association (NMCGA). With that endorsement, I approached the NMCGA member ranches and secured partnerships with Steve Price, Bonanza Creek Ranch; Mike Hobbs, Express UU Bar Ranch; Bob Frost, Cap Rock Ranch; Henry McKinley, Staple Cross Ranch; Grant Mitchell, Singleton Ranches; and Charles Bennett, Bennett Performance Horses.”

In spring of 2010 Cowboy UP! was approached by, and subsequently partnered with, the US Army Wounded Warrior Program (AW2). Within that program were several participants, veterans suffering from a host of afflictions, injuries, and most notably, PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). “We started hosting wounded vets, and one day Sterling showed up,” Rick recalls. “It became evident early on that he would be a perfect fit as our very first candidate.”

## LET’S RIDE

“When I was in the VA hospital in Sante Fe as an inpatient last May,” Sterling relates, “myself and a friend, another vet named Brian Johnson, were released for the weekend. I suggested we go up to my place in the mountains and get away from it all, but Brian countered with a suggestion to go horseback riding.” Brian had been to the Crossed Arrows Ranch before on a wounded warrior visit, and Sterling recalls driving through the gates of the outfit meeting Rick Iannucci and his fiancée, Nancy De Santis for the first time.

“Rick gave me a big hug and said, ‘With every veteran that comes here, the very first thing we say, even if you’ve heard it a million times, is ‘Welcome Home.’” What unfolded over the days and weeks ahead could only be described as life-saving for the young veteran who so desperately needed direction.

“We started to work with the horses, to ride and do what needed to be done around the place,” Sterling says, “and I loved the solitude and the



NANCY DE SANTIS

**Sterling Bucholz (in the denim shirt) gives a shot at a branding on the Bonanza Creek Ranch near Sante Fe, NM.**

camaraderie of being with other vets and spending time just riding.” Though there was no *formal* therapy at the ranch, an almost-magical form of therapy materialized on its own, consisting of simply spending quiet time with those who could relate,

without the pressure of a regimented session based on a formula of invasive questions.

Soon, however, Sterling was ready for more.

Rick was dayworking on the San Cristobal one afternoon, and he men-

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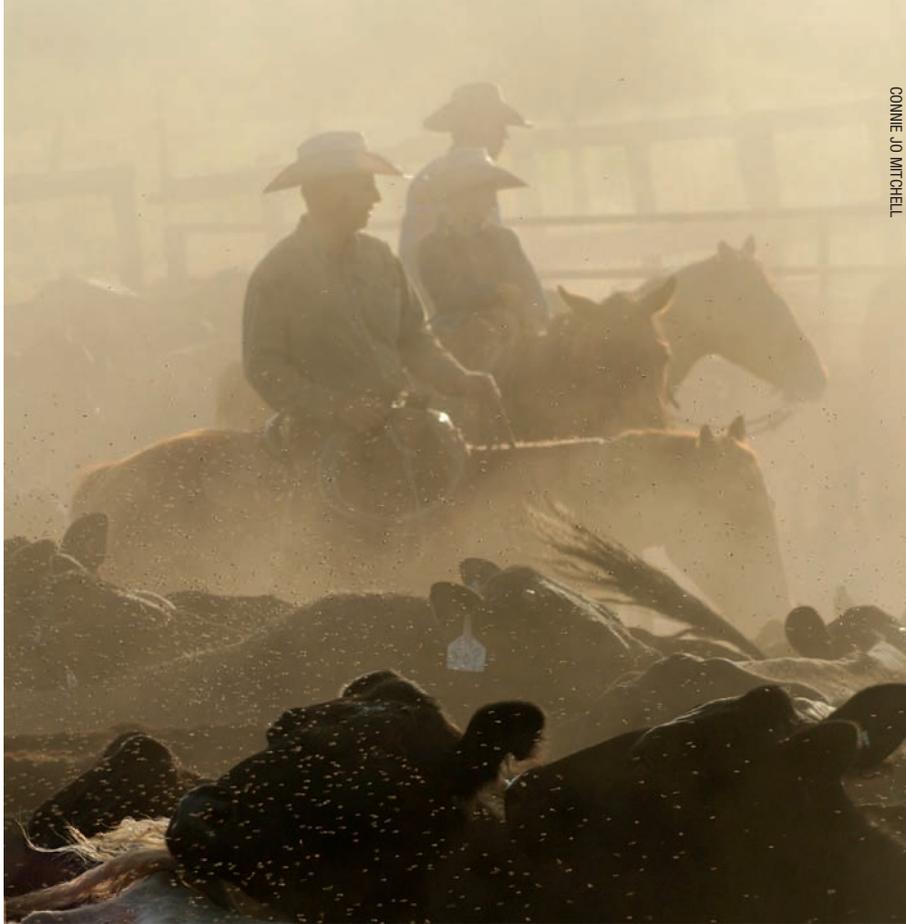
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CONNIE JO MITCHELL

**Sterling's new world; (front to back) Grant Mitchell, Trey Mitchell, and Chris Booth working in the pens on the Conchas Ranch, part of New Mexico's Singleton Ranches.**

tioned to cowboss Grant Mitchell that he had a vet that was almost ready to come out and make a circle with them. Grant readily agreed because he trusted Rick's judgment, and the opportunity was about to change

Sterling's life in more ways than one. "The day we went out there," Sterling recollects, "I was so nervous, and I remember Rick and I were sorting steers, and I told him that I considered it an honor to have the chance

to ride with them out here." Sterling, like so many others returning from the unimaginable overseas, found himself looking for answers and escape by grasping the cold, empty neck of a bottle. "Rick replied, 'Grant and these boys wouldn't let just anyone come out here, they sure don't want a drunk hanging around on the crew,' and it was at that point that I realized the finger of "drunk" would never be pointed at me."

The Cowboy UP! program was designed to move the participant out of the confines of the arena and into a working ranch environment. By doing so, it gives the horse and rider a challenge, a mission to focus on. But the real surprise was just around the corner for Sterling.

"Once we started cowboying with the crew, and Rick explained how everyone has their place on the circle, and nobody rides ahead of anyone during the gather, and all the other intricacies of cowboy etiquette, I began to understand," Sterling says with excitement in his voice. "Rick helped me savvy that the military skills we learned and utilized while on patrol were applicable here in the cowboy world. Each man has his place as we moved forward. We were constantly taking a reading of where the man on either side was at, and



CONNIE JO MITCHELL

**Making a gather on the San Cristobal Ranch, a division of New Mexico's massive Singleton Ranches near Sante Fe.**



**Lance Cpl. Sterling Bucholz in Iraq with the 2/1 Marines.**

nobody moved ahead of the others because to do so would be to put yourself inside the potential field of fire. We worked and performed as a team.”

Another similarity to the Military was that a great deal of the patrol forward movement was done in relative quiet, with intuitive gestures and hand signals playing a significant role in the communication between the team members, just like cowboying. The fact that Sterling could actually apply these skills which were now so deeply embedded in his persona was electrifying, like discovering you can speak the same language as the people who inhabit the country you happen to be visiting. That awakening paid off for Sterling in the form of friendship; in addition to Grant and the others, he credits newfound cowboy buddies Kiowa Cranson and Terry Riddle for their patient mentoring that helped him grasp ahold of this new world.

### THE PURPLE WILDDRAG

As time went on for Sterling, two things happened. Grant Mitchell was impressed enough with the young man’s ability and determination that he offered Sterling a job on the San Cristobal Ranch, which he immediately, but nervously accepted. And the Cowboy UP! program was about to recognize Sterling’s achievement in their own way; by awarding him a purple wildrag in honor of the Purple Heart warriors, a medal which Sterling himself had obviously earned the hard way. This simple silk wildrag, however, signified his inclusion into special brotherhood of working cowboys.

The ceremony was, in typical Rick and Nancy fashion, poignantly simple, gracefully nonchalant, but deeply

meaningful, like patting your favorite horse on the neck while you’re out on circle just because. For Sterling, the wildrag symbolized everything right in his life, a rebirth, more than a second chance. And his mission became clear.

“I learned a saying from my years in the Military,” Rick relates, “See one, Do one, Teach one; and that’s what Sterling’s mission is now, to teach and mentor the next vet into becoming a valued member of the cowboy fraternity.”

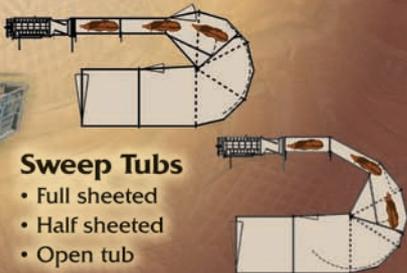
When the next vet comes stomping nervously up the bunkhouse steps dragging his bedroll and packing his warbag, sporting a new silk purple wildrag, excited about the days, weeks and months to come working with the cowboy crew, WR wants to be the first to say ‘Welcome Home’.

If you’d like to make donation of saddles, gear, hay or anything else these cowboy/warriors could use, connect with the Cowboy UP! program online at [www.horsesforheroes.org](http://www.horsesforheroes.org). **WR**

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