

Zachary J. Iscol '97 — From the earliest days of your childhood in Pound Ridge, New York, when you listened to your grandfather speak of his combat experiences in World War II, you have been drawn to stories of valor in the face of adversity. Your father, a self-made entrepreneur, and your mother, an educator and activist, further inspired you with their work ethic and their unflagging belief that true fulfillment comes from lifting up others. Lucky for humanity, *their* DNA and *your* altruistic drive have merged to create an unstoppable force for good.

A self-described late bloomer, what you lacked in physical stature as you grew into an adolescent you made up for in spades with your inquisitive mind, penchant for deep conversation, and burgeoning patriotism. Indeed, Exeter instructors and friends recall a kind of Pied Piper quality about you, a magnetism born of authenticity. “Zach was the kind of kid who was more than liked ... he was loved by his fellow students,” one emeritus history instructor recalls. Around Exeter’s Harkness tables and in Main Street Dormitory, you found what you have called “real community,” and, critically for your future endeavors, exposure to diverse cultures and viewpoints.

Later, at Cornell University, where you studied government, you discovered sprint football and the enlightened mentoring of your coach, Terry Cullen, himself a decorated former Marine Corps infantry officer and Vietnam veteran. You have said that, more than anything else, it was Coach Cullen’s rectitude and encouragement that led you to enter Officer Candidates School and commit fully to a military career.

Initially contracted to become a pilot, you changed course after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Your rationale for joining the infantry was indicative of your character: You didn’t want to miss an opportunity to be connected to enlisted men at the front lines in the battle against Al-Qaeda. That chance came in June of 2004, when you deployed on your second tour of the Iraq War to Anbar Province, then considered one of the most dangerous places on earth.

There, as a platoon commander with 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, you were assigned to lead 30 of your own men, plus an additional 250 Iraqi National Guard troops, a task fraught with unprecedented cultural and logistical challenges. With uncommon charisma and tenacity, and a gift for interpersonal connection, you persevered and succeeded. “Zach has extraordinary communication skills and persuades by personal example,” says a former battalion commander. “He knows just what to say and how and when, using body language and affection. People grow brighter around him.”

The program of training and integration you developed soon became a model in Anbar Province and beyond. Moreover, yours would be the only combined unit to fight on the front lines of the Second Battle of Fallujah, now known as the bloodiest battle of the Iraq War. For your bravery in combat, you were awarded a Bronze Star Medal, the mark of an American hero.

In 2008, after six and a half years with your beloved Marines, you returned to civilian life and decided to make a film about your experiences in Iraq. Writing, directing and producing *The Western Front* helped you come to terms with what you have called the “paradox of war” — that violence begets violence, and that in battle, there are seldom any right answers.

Your platoon sergeant in Iraq has said, “Zach never steps back.” You proved him right. As soon as your film was made, you created Hirepurpose, a business dedicated to helping transitioning service members, veterans and military spouses find fulfilling careers with top American companies and now an important component of Lafayette Media Group, your expanding B Corps.

Around this same time, you and your Marine comrades began to notice an alarming and painful trend. More and more members of the 3rd Battalion were taking their own lives. With the rate of death by suicide fast approaching the total number of men from that battalion killed in Fallujah, you sprang into action, marshalling both human and financial capital to save your brothers and sisters in arms. Thus was born Headstrong, a nonprofit that has partnered with the Weill Cornell Medical Center to provide comprehensive mental health care programs for post-9/11 military veterans free of cost, stigma and bureaucracy. The organization’s slogan, “Healing the hidden wounds of war,” describes the critical work that you and your team are doing to rescue a generation who might otherwise be marginalized, or even forgotten.

Since its inception in 2012, Headstrong counselors have treated approximately 450 veterans for traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and other forms of mental illness, with dozens more veterans reaching out for help each month. Now offering services in eight cities across the United States, plans are afoot to expand further into both urban and rural areas, and to extend care to other at-risk populations, including LGBTQIA youth, victims of domestic violence, and Syrian refugees.

Finally, and most importantly, in the midst of this nonstop advocacy, you became an adoring husband to Meredith and the doting father of three beautiful children, the consummate family man who understands to the core just how precious time with loved ones is.

Zach, for being an ambassador of compassion, an entrepreneur of hope, and the living embodiment of *non sibi*, it is an honor to present you today with the 2017 John Phillips Award.