



Soldier, leader, and author Eric Greitens reviews his schedule at The Greitens Group offices in St. Louis's Central West End. His day included promoting his book and writing a recommendation for a prospective Navy SEAL.

# RESILIENCE *in* PRACTICE

What makes Eric Greitens tick?

BY WADE LIVINGSTON

## HE DOESN'T REMEMBER

the blast from the suicide truck bomb. The aftermath is clearer. Soldiers coughing. The burning in his throat. Blood on his uniform—not his own. He tells this story in one of his books, of sitting on a rooftop in Fallujah after the 2007 attack. He was battered, yet ready to fight. He felt lucky. He had plenty of bullets, his med kit, the high ground, good cover, and a clear view of every approach. He knew he could stay there for hours if necessary, though he would eventually need some water.

But on this night, Eric Greitens offered wine with the lamb burgers with pita and greens. Everyone chose water. After dinner, Eric led his guests to a side room that is, most accurately, a library. He had one last story to tell. He wanted to ensure his company left full.

Eric stood in the middle of the library, which doubles as a makeshift home office. It houses several bookshelves sporting presidential biographies, multiple copies of the books he's written, and atop one bookcase, his nearly five-inch thick Oxford dissertation on humanitarian aid for children in war zones.

Eric gestured toward the mantel.

On the mantel was Winston Churchill's multivolume history of World War II, which was flanked on either side by two jugs like rooks on a chessboard protecting the assets in their charge. The two jugs were adorned with drawings of Odysseus, who, like

Eric, endured quite the journey and told tales of it. But neither Churchill's tomes nor the jugs interested Eric at the moment. He pointed at the framed print.

Above the mantel in his Central West End St. Louis home hangs Winslow Homer's *The Veteran in a New Field*.

This is one of the paintings I included in *Resilience*, Eric said, referencing his fourth book, which debuted in March.

*Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life* is a collection of letters and emails that he wrote to his friend and fellow Navy SEAL, Zach Walker. Zach Walker is a pseudonym, but the problems Walker faced—re-acclimating to civilian life and searching for his purpose—are very real. Eric understands this, and he wants you to.

And so he told the story of Homer's painting. The soldier sheds his uniform, picks up his scythe, and works the wheat field in front of him, his back toward the dark undertones—the past—that dominate the foreground. The golden wheat, a bountiful crop, lies ahead. Opportunity. A brilliant blue sky hovers above. Hope.

As he spoke, he looked at the print, then back to his guests. Eric Greitens—Missouri native; battle-tested Navy SEAL; Naval Reserve officer; White House fellow; nonprofit founder; leadership guru; Rhodes Scholar; author; businessman; public speaker—took shape. His accomplishments manifest in his mannerisms and appearance.

HARRY KATZ

As a Navy SEAL officer, Eric was deployed four times to Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa, and Iraq. His awards include a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.



His expression is disarming; intelligent blue eyes teem with energy but convey calm. His forehead is prominent, smooth and tall, the bow of a vessel awash with analogies of ancient wisdom: as the archer must draw back the bow to propel the arrow forward, so too must we look back on our past to realize our purpose, he might say, though more eloquently. There are scars around his jawline, one the result of an elbow he took in a boxing match.

The flecks of gray hair denote a man in his early forties; his physique is that of an athlete untouched by middle age. His hand offers a firm shake, controlled, not domineering; the calluses, which he'll pick at during a business call, bespeak blue-collar values, the kind that prefer used cars over new. His palms are dry, his nails neatly clipped.

Skeptics who meet the man might find themselves flummoxed. How can someone be so ... good? They might liken him to Ed Harris's portrayal of astronaut John Glenn in *The Right Stuff*.

In the movie, Glenn is cast as the all-American frontman of the Mercury Seven. He knows just what to say and might be too perfect, but his less-polished colleagues come to see him as the glue of the group and, maybe, the leader. And Eric has many followers.

Krystal Taylor is one of them. She's worked for Eric since 2011. "Eric has challenged me to do things I never thought I could do," she says.

Earlier in the day, after lunch, Eric rushed off to a private meeting and left his guests with Krystal, vice president of the Greitens Group. The for-profit arm of Eric's business offers corporate leadership training, organizes speaking gigs, and promotes his books: *Strength and Compassion*, *The Heart and the Fist*, *The Warrior's Heart*, and *Resilience*.

Krystal knows Eric as a man who might have been a bit nervous before his 2011 appearance on *The Colbert Report*; he researched Stephen Colbert, studied clips of others' appearances. "He likes to have a model," she says. He prefers jeans; "He likes to be comfortable." He enjoys Thai food and the occasional chocolate-chip cookie but tries to avoid caffeine. Krystal says his smoothies, which he sips throughout the day, are his fuel.

But what really fuels Eric is his work with veterans through The Mission Continues (TMC). That's where many of his conversations start and end. And that's where Krystal chauffeured his guests for a tour.

Eric founded TMC in 2007 with his own combat pay. At that time, he was sleeping on an air mattress in a barren apartment.

TMC occupies the ground floor of 1141 South Seventh Street in St. Louis. A stack of cinder blocks greets visitors. On them are the organization's principles: work hard; trust; learn and grow; respect; have fun.

**HE FOUNDED TMC  
WITH COMBAT PAY.  
AT THE TIME, HE  
WAS SLEEPING ON AN  
AIR MATTRESS IN A  
BARREN APARTMENT.**

**SERVILE**

*TIME* magazine's Joe Klein featured TMC in the publication's cover story in June 2013. Klein worried about the problems veterans faced when they returned home. PTSD. Alcohol and drug abuse. Suicide. He asked a simple question: can service save us? A few months later, for a follow-up story, Klein had his answer. Yes. TMC provides a certain number of veterans with community service fellowships at nonprofits throughout the country. It also organizes platoons of veteran volunteers around community-improvement projects.

TMC staffers, such as Meredith Knopp, vice president of programs, and Lyndsey Reichardt, development director, vouch for Eric's prowess as a charismatic, in-the-trenches leader, the kind *Fortune* magazine ranked among the top fifty leaders in the world, at number thirty-eight.

TMC staff tell stories about physical fitness days that he organizes for the crew. He once led them to the Arch on a cold, rainy November day for some exercise. Eric was right beside them, doing calisthenics and lugging the five cinder blocks around in the mud. Tourists snapped pictures. It was a fun outing, though no one thought to bring towels or clean clothes; the challenge was getting back to the office without soiling their cars. Improvise, adapt, overcome, as Eric might say.

Meredith and Lyndsey quote Eric and use his analogies. A staple is the compass, TMC's original logo. If you can make one degree of positive change in your life, they'll say, that's a start. Challenge yourself. Take action.

Challenge is a word Eric is fond of. Purpose is another. Earlier in the day, Eric lunched with Tim Smith, one of the first TMC fellows. They discussed issues facing veterans upon their return from combat.

COURTESY OF THE MISSION CONTINUES

**CHALLENGE**

Eric's idea behind founding The Mission Continues is that veterans need a purpose; finding that can change their lives.



What are the problems, in Eric's opinion? A system that prescribes pills, delivers disability checks, addresses wounds, and not much more. A system that fails to challenge veterans to further service—to realize their purpose.

But, as Eric says, veterans can change the narrative and author their own stories. Tim shared his.

The Army veteran served in Iraq. Eight of his friends died in an IED blast. When he returned home, he struggled. He was unemployed for months. With one child and another on the way, he and his wife moved in with his mother.

As the lunch guests slurped their noodles and picked at their rice, Tim recounted how he had gone back to school, met Eric, and become a TMC fellow. Now, he's a successful businessman—the president of Patriot Commercial Cleaning, which employs veterans in need of a mission.

As Tim talked across the table at Café Saigon, Eric smiled. It was an easy smile, barely wrinkling his face.

Eric joined the conversation.

"Have you read the chapter on 'Story' in *Resilience*?" he asked. Seeing blank looks, he continued.

As a writer, he said, you understand the power of the narrative, our personal stories. You learn that our own stories are meaningful, and you realize the opportunity to make meaning of them. The gist, to



Five cinder blocks emblazoned with the nonprofit's values greet visitors to the offices of The Mission Continues. TMC staffers use them for team-building activities during field days.

HARRY KATZ



Eric holds his son Joshua, who is only nine months old, in front of a print of Winslow Homer's painting *The Veteran in a New Field*—an 1865 painting of a veteran of the Union army.

## PURPOSE

paraphrase his writing in *Resilience*: you have to wrestle with your past to navigate your future, to find your purpose.

Eric entered the conversation, offering context to Tim's story. He wasted no words, with the economy of a writer who admires Hemingway. He was empathetic, but above all, he spoke with conviction. He is a believer—in himself and his work.

As Eric spoke, Tim nodded. He is a believer, too.

Lunch ended. Eric had finished half of his dollop of rice. He placed his napkin over the uneaten food. The two men walked back to Eric's office.

The office space is new; the Greitens Group relocated from the TMC complex to a location closer to his home in August. The move coincided with Eric's departure as CEO of TMC. He now serves on its board of directors.

Eric describes his personal office as Spartan. It is. Several tables have been pushed together to form a large desk. There's a telephone. A rolling whiteboard. A large bookcase occupies the near wall and houses copies of *The Heart and the Fist*. A few pictures sit on the bookcase. One of Eric with his brothers. Another of the entire family. One of him and his wife, Sheena. And a picture of Eric with his nine-month old son, Joshua.

Fatherhood is Eric's newest challenge; he's struggling to feed Joshua without making a mess.

When he talks about Joshua, Eric smiles—really smiles. He might even guffaw, the veins in his forehead flaring. It's unrestrained emotion, which the public might rarely see. He is a polished, focused man whose lone flaw, as a TMC staffer says, is landing a joke.

Eric is less guarded when he talks about Zach Walker, his muse for *Resilience*. Earlier in the day, I'd asked him to tell me a story about Zach. He thought for a moment. He recounted Hell Week during SEAL training.

As darkness fell, a calorie-deprived Eric had just finished a medical check and was heading to change his uniform before the hazing resumed. Zach, who'd previously survived the crucible, passed him on the way.

"Hey, Mr. G, I got ya," Zach said, cryptically.

Eric was confused.

He reached the changing station and donned his camouflage shirt. Drill instructors yelled. They sprayed him with a fire hose. They demanded pushups.

Eric assumed the position. He lowered his body to the ground. And then he felt it—in the chest pocket of his shirt. A bulge. A Clif Bar. Calories. Camaraderie.

The water pelted his face. He smiled.

Eric is a man who speaks in stories. And all of them have a point.

As I stood in the library and listened to Eric tell the day's final tale, that of Homer's painting, I wondered about Eric's future. Public service? Political office? Perhaps. He's considering how best to serve in the next phase of his life. What's ahead in his wheat field?

And I found myself wondering about my own field. I believe that was his purpose.