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The War Within

Veteran and affiliate owner Atom Ziniewicz struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and bipolar disorder. He ultimately lost his battle, but he fought with his CrossFit community at his back.

By Hilary Achauer

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Erik McKenna

On Sept. 21, 2012, 34-year-old Atom Ziniewicz faced down two Alaska State Troopers near Mile 270 of the Parks Highway in Fairbanks, Alaska. The former Green Beret, CrossFit athlete, coach and owner of CrossFit Liberation was armed with a handgun. Earlier in the day, he had shot and wounded 21-year-old Brenton Green and then disappeared. The police began a search, combing the area and establishing checkpoints along the highway.

Ziniewicz had spent the last year fighting a losing battle with bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and alcoholism. His life back home in Virginia was spiraling out of control.

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"I'm not like this," he had told his ex-wife, Carrie Satterlee, before he left.

"I can't quiet this noise in my head," he had told his good friend and fellow coach Scott Horton.

Deep down, Satterlee—who separated from Ziniewicz in February 2012—thinks he found the escape he was looking for in Alaska.

"I think he was looking for a way out," she said. "Given his background, he knew what the response (of the police) would be."

Four hours after the Green shooting, Ziniewicz appeared. He came out of the woods, about 30 yards away from the two troopers. Ziniewicz drew his gun, and the trooper fired. Ziniewicz was killed.

The voices, finally, were quiet.

Beginnings

When Carrie Satterlee met Ziniewicz, they were both working as civilian contractors in Iraq. Ziniewicz had served in the Army from 1997 to 2004. He was a Special Forces sergeant, part of the military force often referred to as the Green Berets.

Ziniewicz began his CrossFit journey in 2004 when stationed in Okinawa, Japan.

"Fortunately for me, special-operations forces were some of the first to start implementing the CrossFit method into their fitness regime because of its high intensity and efficacy," Ziniewicz wrote on his bio for the CrossFit Liberation website.

Once he completed his military service, Ziniewicz left the Army. He wanted to be in the thick of things, in Iraq and Afghanistan, so he took a civilian job as an instructor for a protective security detail.

Satterlee met Ziniewicz in February 2004 at Camp Dublin, a training camp in Iraq. The two started out as friends, and as they worked together a romance blossomed. They started dating in August 2005.

"My first impression of Atom was that he was antisocial," Satterlee said. "He never really hung out with the rest of the camp members when we had barbecues or get-togethers. Then one day I remember him coming out for a barbecue and he seemed to be hanging around me a lot.

"I was always so amazed at how intelligent he was and that he had a very wicked sense of humor. And while he was a complete smartass, he also had this gentleness to him that was very disarming. He was very thoughtful and generous to those around him. He always seemed to be

**"He knew how to talk to clients.
He would say, 'Don't try—do.'"**

—Scott Horton on Ziniewicz

good at whatever he applied himself to, whether it was being an outstanding marksman, writing or swimming. Even if it was something he had never tried before, he just set himself to the task and was a natural," she said.



Christopher Nolan

Ziniewicz was an early adopter of CrossFit who set up a training space for civilian contractors and deployed service members in Afghanistan.

While Ziniewicz and Satterlee started dating, Ziniewicz became more involved in CrossFit.

"When I was in Iraq and Afghanistan throughout 2005 to 2010 my journey took on a life of its own. I became a CrossFit certified trainer on one of my trips home," Ziniewicz wrote.

Satterlee and Ziniewicz were married in Mexico on Oct. 3, 2009.

Meanwhile, Ziniewicz continued his work as an instructor and mentor in Afghanistan for most of 2009 and 2010, and he took it upon himself to create and run an outdoor functional fitness training gym for his colleagues and deployed service members. He helped them build a training ground complete with tires, stones, sledgehammers, pull-up stations and weights.



Scott Horton was an early client of Ziniewicz's and lost 85 lb. while training with him.

Warning Signs

Ziniewicz came back to the United States in March 2010 and began working as a personal trainer at a Globo Gym in Virginia. Horton was one of his clients.

"I was 330 lb. when I met Atom," Horton said. The two shared an instant connection.

"He had a good sense of people's abilities," Horton said. "He knew how to talk to clients. He would say, 'Don't try—do.'"

"He didn't know he had bipolar disorder. But then he threw himself into CrossFit and got clean and sober."

—Carrie Satterlee

Through CrossFit and Ziniewicz's leadership, Horton was able to lose 85 lb. and bring his high blood pressure and cholesterol to normal levels. Horton talked about his experience with CrossFit and Ziniewicz in a video in the February 2012 *CrossFit Journal* video [My CrossFit Story: Scott Horton](#).

Kerri McKay was another of Ziniewicz's original personal-training clients.

"He made you want to be better. He brought something out that you didn't know you were capable of," McKay said.

In December 2010, Ziniewicz and Satterlee realized a long-held goal—they opened their CrossFit affiliate, CrossFit Liberation in Lorton, Va.

"The name (of the affiliate) was a collaboration between the two of us," Satterlee said. "We wanted to have a patriotic theme. The motto for the Army Special Forces is '*De Oppresso Liber*' (to free the oppressed). We thought it would be great to have our motto be 'Freeing the Fitness Oppressed,' and suddenly CrossFit Liberation came to us."

Freedom may have been on Ziniewicz's mind, because ever since he had returned from overseas he was plagued by dramatic mood swings. The stress of opening a new business exacerbated his problems.



Nicole Bedard

When Ziniewicz's condition worsened, CrossFit Liberation coaches and members stepped up to support the affiliate owner during his struggles.

"He had difficulty integrating back into society," Satterlee said. "He struggled with drinking, and that was masking other things."

Satterlee added: "He didn't know he had bipolar disorder. But then he threw himself into CrossFit and got clean and sober."

Ziniewicz stayed sober for a year and half, but the stress of his new business took its toll.

"The lack of sleep and the stress of the gym led to a progression of mood swings," Satterlee said. "He experienced highs, and he would throw himself into work, then he would hit a low," she said.

Then, in November 2011, Ziniewicz had a 10-day manic episode, which led to a breakdown.

"We got him into a hospital. We knew there was something else going on," Satterlee said.

They had been to other doctors but had never received a diagnosis. Finally, a doctor diagnosed Ziniewicz with bipolar disorder 1 and PTSD, which was confirmed by another doctor.

The National Institute of Mental Health defines a person with a bipolar disorder 1 as someone who exhibits "manic or mixed episodes that last at least seven days, or by manic symptoms that are so severe that the person needs immediate hospital care. Usually, the person also has depressive episodes typically lasting two weeks."

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, bipolar disorder affects approximately 5.7 million American adults, or about 2.6 percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older in a given year.

"The Department of Veterans Affairs has quietly released a new report on post-traumatic stress disorder, showing that since 9/11, nearly 30 percent of the 834,463 Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans treated at V.A. hospitals and clinics have been diagnosed with PTSD," Jamie Reno wrote in the Oct. 21, 2012, *Daily Beast* post "[Nearly 30% of Vets Treated by V.A. Have PTSD.](#)"



Nicole Bedard

Horton lifts under the eye of his coach and friend, Ziniewicz.

He continued, "Veterans advocates say the new V.A. report is the most damning evidence yet of the profound impact multiple deployments have had on American service men and women since 9/11. Troops who've been deployed multiple times to Iraq and Afghanistan are more than three times as likely as soldiers with no previous deployments to screen positive for PTSD and major depression, according to a 2010 study published by the *American Journal for Public Health*."

Although the diagnosis was upsetting, Satterlee said she and Ziniewicz felt a sense of relief when they found out the underlying cause of his mood swings.

"He took his medication. It can sometimes take years to find the right mix, but he was excited. He told me it all made sense, and he was happy to be getting treatment," she said.

A Losing Battle

The athletes at CrossFit Liberation had no idea about Ziniewicz's struggles.

"He was such a good coach," McKay said. "He inspired so many people. He made people feel like they could do anything," she said. "He was larger than life and could bring greatness out of anyone."

McKay admitted that Ziniewicz was so physically and mentally strong she had a hard time picturing him struggling.

A few months after his diagnosis, Ziniewicz started drinking again. Horton said he stopped taking his medication because it made him feel fuzzy.

"He didn't like the way the meds made him feel," said Horton, who in addition to being the first member of CrossFit Liberation, had also become a coach. "He told me he drank to quiet the noise."

Ziniewicz was able to keep everything together for a while, but about five months after the diagnosis he spiraled again. This time he was taking his medication, but he began to cycle through mania and depression more quickly than ever before.

"Every couple of weeks he would have a bad day," Satterlee said. "It created a lot of anguish for him. He was embarrassed," she said.

Satterlee knew it was time to let everyone know why Ziniewicz was behaving strangely.

"I brought in the coaches, told them. They told the members, who were incredibly supportive," she said.

The drinking got worse, and Ziniewicz started to miss classes.

In February 2012, Ziniewicz and Satterlee decided to separate. The illness was a strain on their marriage.

"He couldn't focus on his illness, running the gym, and the marriage," Satterlee said. "We came to an agreement. He was my best friend, but we made an agreement, and at the time he was on his meds."

Ziniewicz moved in with Horton and his partner, Mike Newsome.

"Carrie was the love of his life," Horton said. "He thought she deserved better. He saw himself as broken."

The Worst Enemy

Horton and Newsome did their best for Ziniewicz, but he was cycling through his moods more rapidly than before. One manic spiral, combined with drinking, landed Ziniewicz in the ER. Every rehab facility in the area was full, so Horton called in a favor and got Ziniewicz a bed in the Psychiatric Institute of Washington.

"It was scary," Horton said of the institute. "I didn't want to leave him there, but Atom told me it was OK. I told him, 'Pretend this is a really bad WOD.'"

Horton said Ziniewicz looked at him with tears in his eyes and said, "Thanks, man, I need to do this. I'm OK. Don't worry about me."

"The support was horrible from the V.A.," Satterlee said. "A lot of waiting in line, and we had to submit him for evaluation. The medical system in general was absolutely frustrating. It's a matter of beds. Sometimes, all that's left is jail."

"There is an amazing rehab center for injured veterans, but it's nearly impossible to find something similar for mental health."

—Carrie Satterlee

She added: "When they are not stable (at home), it's infuriating. You can't call the hospital, so you just call the police. Then they would ask me if he was threatening me."

Satterlee wondered if it had to come to that. She knew he had the potential to hurt himself or others.

"Every avenue leads to nowhere," she said.

"There is an amazing rehab center for injured veterans, but it's nearly impossible to find something similar for mental health," she explained.

Satterlee said that for Ziniewicz, the psychiatric hospital was a fate worse than death.

Satterlee realized she needed to accept what was going on. She started doing research and found that there were one or two facilities in the U.S. that would fit Ziniewicz's situation, but their insurance didn't cover it, and they didn't have enough money to pay out of pocket.

Ziniewicz had spent seven years of his life in the military, from age 19 to age 26, and then six years as a civilian contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Suicide is now the leading cause of death in the army," Tina Rosenberg wrote on Sept. 26, 2012, in the *New York Times* Opinionator article "[For Veterans, a Surge of New Treatments for Trauma](#)." "More soldiers die by suicide than in combat or vehicle accidents, and rates are rising: July, with 38 suicides among active duty and reserve soldiers, was the worst month since the Army began counting. General Lloyd Austin III, the army's second in command, called suicide, 'the worst enemy I have faced in my 37 years in the army.'"

Rosenberg wrote: "There are many reasons a soldier will take his own life, but one major factor is post-traumatic stress. Anyone who undergoes trauma can experience post-traumatic stress disorder—victims of rape and other crimes, family violence, a car accident. It is epidemic, however, among soldiers, especially those who see combat."

According to the American Psychological Association, bipolar disorder is a combination of biological and environmental factors. Stress and trauma increase the risk. Satterlee said Ziniewicz was involved in multiple IED incidents while overseas. In addition, Ziniewicz's best friend was shot and killed when they were both 19, right around the time Ziniewicz joined the Army.



James Cullum

As mental illness took hold, the things Ziniewicz loved most started to slip away.

"We tried to change up his medication, but we were lucky if we could see the psychiatrist once a month, and he would just give us a prescription," Satterlee said.

"He really gave this his all," she said, "but he ran into problems and he didn't know where to go."

Horton saw a man desperately trying to hang on to himself.

"He would leave Post-it notes around that said things like, 'You're worthy' or 'you're strong,'" he said.

Ziniewicz had a whiteboard in his room in Horton and Newsome's house. On it, Ziniewicz had written in green Sharpie, "I had to fail in order for you to succeed. Be better than me."

In August 2012, Ziniewicz hit a low point. He was cycling through mania and depression every few days. Satterlee said he was having suicidal thoughts.

"He could never understand how someone could take their own life," Satterlee said. "He was scared, because he was having these thoughts."

Ziniewicz's doctors changed the medications, kept adjusting them, trying to find the combination that would work for him.

Meanwhile, Ziniewicz continued to drink, trying to quiet the voices he told Horton kept him up at night.

"He told me that's why he slept with the TV on," Horton said, "because of the voices."

Letting Go

The timing was particularly difficult for the CrossFit Liberation team. They were gearing up to host their second annual competition, The Cold War, in which teams and individuals from around the mid-Atlantic region compete in indoor and outdoor events in the dead of winter. The first event, held in December 2011, was put on in partnership with Operation Ward 57, benefitting wounded soldiers, a cause close to Ziniewicz's heart. It was a big success, and Ziniewicz was excited about the competition in 2012.



Courtesy of Carrie Satterlee

Ziniewicz (second from right) with members of CrossFit Liberation.

It wasn't enough. Instead of getting better, things just got worse.

"I'm not sure what triggered the episode," Satterlee said. "But he went into a meltdown. He tried to shut the gym down."

Satterlee and the other coaches got Ziniewicz to stop, and once he calmed down, Ziniewicz decided he needed to take a break and leave Satterlee to run the gym.

He wanted to take some time to get his head straight.

"We didn't support it," Satterlee said. "He was really embarrassed. We kept encouraging him to stay."

Horton recalls the last time he saw Ziniewicz alive.

"We stood in the driveway," Horton said. "Atom had tears in his eyes. He told me not to cry. 'This is not your fault,' he said. 'This is me. You guys did more for me than anyone.'"

Horton said Ziniewicz told him the Cold War competition was going to be epic and said Horton and Newsome were two of his best coaches.

Looking back, Horton said he thinks Ziniewicz knew he wasn't coming back. "He was telling me these things because he knew he wouldn't be there," Horton said. "Then he hugged me like he's never hugged me before. That's the last time I ever saw him."

Final Escape

Ziniewicz went to Alaska, and once there he went off his meds immediately.

"He hit a bad depression," Satterlee said. "I talked to him three or four times. He seemed pretty depressed, but he also seemed determined."

Satterlee was hopeful when Ziniewicz called with new ideas for the Cold War competition.

Then, on Friday, Sept. 21, Satterlee got the call she was dreading. It was the police.

According to the police report, Ziniewicz, armed with a handgun, confronted 21-year-old Brenton Green and 21-year-old Kimberly Scharber. Green said Ziniewicz threatened the two of them and shot Green twice. Both Green and Scharber fled the area and reported the incident to Alaska State Troopers. Green was treated for two gunshot wounds at the hospital and then released.

Alaska State Troopers and Alaska Wildlife Troopers, including a K-9 team and members of the Special Emergency Reaction Team from Fairbanks, Healy, Cantwell and Palmer, all responded to the area and established a perimeter. At approximately noon, two members of the Special Emergency Reaction Team saw Ziniewicz appear out of the woods about 30 yards away. The officers attempted to arrest Ziniewicz. The police drew their rifles, and Ziniewicz drew his handgun.

Ziniewicz was fatally shot.

**"Without CrossFit, we would
have lost him a long time ago."**

—Kerri McKay

In the article "[Virginia Man Shot, Killed by Alaska State Troopers Near Healy](#)," KTVA.com, a local news station, reported that Ziniewicz stayed at Denali Dome Home Bed and Breakfast for three nights about three weeks before the shooting. Terry Miller, the owner of the bed and breakfast, described Ziniewicz as "crazy" and "lost" according to the report. Eric Helwig, a clerk at a liquor store where Ziniewicz bought \$400 of chewing tobacco and \$400 of liquor, said Ziniewicz seemed like an average, nice guy. "He seemed sane to me," Helwig said.

Satterlee traveled with Horton and Newsome to Alaska to collect Ziniewicz's remains.

"The police were sweet," she said.

Satterlee began asking questions, and from what she could tell, Green and Scharber came to Ziniewicz's cabin and were hanging out with him. It's not clear exactly what precipitated the shooting, but there was some type of altercation. Satterlee knew Ziniewicz had cash on him, and it was gone when the police arrived.

"Atom was a highly trained individual," Satterlee said. "He devoted his life to helping people. He had a kind and gentle heart, and he wouldn't hurt a fly. There is a lot that doesn't add up."



Erik McKenna

Ziniewicz's bio remains on the CrossFit Liberation website to honor his memory and contribution to the community.

"I think Atom was looking for a way out," Satterlee said. "Given his background, he knew what the response of the police would be. I don't blame the officer, but I still have questions."

She added: "Alaska is the last refuge of people suffering from PTSD. Episodes are popping up left and right. People are looking to get away."

CrossFit was not enough to save Ziniewicz, but Satterlee believes it kept him healthy for longer than he would have otherwise been.

"It was the one thing that brought positivity to his life," she said.

McKay agrees.

"He was fighting a constant battle," she said. "Without CrossFit, we would have lost him a long time ago. He truly loved the members (of CrossFit Liberation) and he loved CrossFit," she said.

"The members were devastated," Horton said of losing Ziniewicz. "It was so horrific and violent. It brought us closer together."

Forging Ahead

Despite their shock and sadness, Satterlee and her team decided to go forward with the Cold War competition. They dedicated it to Ziniewicz's memory and raised money for Invisible Wound, a nonprofit organization benefitting victims of PTSD, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The event was a success, with over 200 athletes from the mid-Atlantic region competing, representing over 40 affiliates across six states. The two-day event included a swim workout as well as a weighted rucksack march.

"We are all human and can't tackle all the curve-balls that life may throw at us on our own, we need to work as a team. The CFL community has literally saved my life and looked out for my well-being on more than one occasion. I can only hope that my continued work here has repayed (sic) that in some small way," Ziniewicz wrote on his [CrossFit Liberation bio](#), which has been preserved on the website in his memory.

There are thousands of men and women who, like Ziniewicz, are returning home after serving their country to find their war has just begun. Media reports such as the ones quoted above indicate the mental-health services offered by the V.A. are seriously inadequate to the current need, but moves are being made to change this. Harvard Medical School has joined the Association of American Medical Colleges, along with more than 100 medical schools, in a national initiative called [Joining Forces](#), formed under the leadership of Michelle Obama and Jill Biden. The initiative seeks to create more opportunities for military families and works to expand access to wellness programs.

Nobody knows what Ziniewicz was looking for in Alaska, or what he was thinking when he faced down the state troopers. What is clear is that despite the efforts of his friends, his family and his community, Ziniewicz did not get the help he needed, and he chose the only option he thought remained.



About the Author

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