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Taking off at Linfield

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Tom Wiggins '09

Taking off at Linfield



Tom Wiggins '09, a business major, is a former Army Airborne Ranger who was injured in Afghanistan. Today, he combines Linfield classes with escorting politicians and celebrities to high-conflict areas around the world for Evergreen Aviation.



Tom Wiggins '09 has little memory of his confrontation with death.

But the former U.S. Army Airborne Ranger has a new zest for living and has made a nearly full recovery since his heart stopped three times on a battlefield in Afghanistan in 2004. Now 25, he is a Linfield business major, has a career

with Evergreen Aviation and has self-published a book, *100 Days in the Ghan*, detailing his combat experiences.

"I have a new appreciation for life," Wiggins said. "I've learned that life is too short and nothing is promised so you can't wait for opportunities to arise. You have to make them."

Wiggins, born and raised in Gainesville, Fla., was deployed five times to Iraq and Afghanistan during his three years of military service. But his life changed with the crack of gunfire on May 13, 2004, when he was ambushed and critically injured during a patrol of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. He was shot 17 times, including twice in the head, and spent the next two months in a coma.

"I knew something had happened to me but I didn't know what," he said. "One day I woke up and couldn't hear anymore."

Wiggins used a dry-erase board to communicate during his 18-month recovery at a series of military hospitals. Although the shooting left him deaf, he now has limited hearing thanks to a surgically implanted cochlear device that amplifies sound.

Wiggins, senior leader of Evergreen Defense and Security Services, relocated to McMinnville and resumed the education he set aside for the military. He has found an unexpected camaraderie among Linfield students, faculty and staff and has been particularly impressed by the strong Business Department.

"Everyone at Linfield wants to see each other succeed," said Wiggins, who models his life as a business. "Everything that you do every single day is a part of your business, and depending on how you run that business, you will either succeed or fail."

In his Linfield classes, a stenographer sits beside Wiggins in the front row, types each lecture and transmits the classroom discussion instantaneously to his laptop screen.

Mike Jones, Harold C. Elkinton Professor of Accounting, is also a military veteran and has connected with Wiggins on a personal level.

"I feel invested in him and I enjoy having him in class," Jones said. "He's a quick wit."

Besides managing a full course load at Linfield, Wiggins also travels extensively for Evergreen – he logged 85 days last year escorting politicians and celebrities to high-conflict areas around the world. Clients have included former President George H.W. Bush and actor George Clooney.

Delford Smith, owner and founder of Evergreen Aviation and a Linfield College trustee, said Wiggins' initiative drives his success.

"Tom has demonstrated natural leadership, which is one of the rarest talents on earth," he said. "Tom has the ability to overcome adversity. These setbacks seem to be a launching pad for him to conceive, believe and achieve."

Looking ahead, Wiggins hopes to hold public office one day.

"I have a lot I want to do," he said. "My goal has always been to be in the U.S. Senate by age 32. That may seem very ambitious, but I've learned that goal setting is goal-getting."

– Laura Davis