

TRICO TAKE, BY ROD CROSSMAN



# Warrior Fishing

*Standing with soldiers;  
learning to fly fish and mend.*  
by Miles Nolte

“TRY TO GET THE NEXT CAST THREE feet farther upstream and another foot out into the current.”

The young man is crouched in tall grass and his large frame is hunched, making himself as small as possible, a skill he learned in boot camp and refined in various Iraqi provinces. His body curls instinctively. He pauses, takes a breath, begins to retrieve line.

“Wait until your line is well clear of the fish, and then pick it up slowly.”

I regret this last bit of advice. There’s little doubt he would have been patient with his line and waited until it was downstream of the fish before trying to cast again. I should have kept my mouth shut. But I can see them finning and swirling in the depression of the stream bed behind the waving clump of ranunculus, and my palms are sweating despite the cool morning. Because I’m not holding the rod, all I can do is offer suggestions and clench my jaw.

After the flies have safely passed the fish, he flicks his rod back and starts feeling out false casts.

“Like that, sir?”

He’s got his line in the air and is tentatively working it out with loose, erratic loops, but he’s doing it to the left of the fish, just like I showed him.

“Yeah, that’s nice. And I told you: Stop calling me sir.”

“Sorry, sir. Uh, sorry. Can’t help it.”

The young man is deceptively sturdy, built like a brick outhouse, as we say around here. His cheeks are smooth and his hair is cropped close—high and tight, as they say on the base where he lives. This is his second day of handling a fly rod.

The fish he’s hiding from and trying to entice are spring creek savants. One just ate a perfectly drifting twig, but rejected a dragging 5X tippet in the translucent microcurrents. So we switched to 6X. These fish are also large. Of the three brown

trout lying together in the depression, jostling and flashing their white jaws, the smallest is probably 18 inches and the biggest will go at least 22. This is varsity fishing. Did I mention this is his second day holding a fly rod? Ever?

The young man is many things. Aside from being sturdy, he is also quick-witted and observant. He has that particular brand of aquatic intellect that comes from spending a life on and around water. He doesn’t smile easily, but when something catches him off guard he smiles broadly. More than anything, the young man is a marine. A sergeant.

Much later in our relationship, though not in terms of time, the Sergeant and I will stand at a clean bar and he will tell me about being blown up by a roadside bomb. He will tell me about his perforated organs, his one functioning lung. He will tell me about the British soldiers that saved his life when they had every right to ignore his radio call

---

and orders to stay out of harm's way. He'll tell me that the Brits get a bad rap.

"They're tough and brave and well trained," he'll say, "better than some of us are." The Sergeant is 22 years old. If not for his sleek cheeks, I'd swear we were the same age.

His cast is good. It lands softly but a bit too far left. I can see the small nymphs drift just beside the trout holding tight to the inside edge of the bucket. Both patterns have my complete confidence. One is a sow bug recipe whispered to me by an infamous angler in his dusty trailer hung with dead animal parts and cigarette smoke. The other is my own spin-off of a popular tailwater bug. I tied both myself. The fish doesn't turn its head.

"Am I clear, sir?"

"Almost."

**T**he Sergeant and I met yesterday in an echoing gymnasium. He and five other soldiers arrived with a retinue in tow: military wives, mothers, and sisters carrying Crock-Pots, fried chicken, and bowls of mayonnaise-based salads; older men carrying armfuls of spiffy donated gear. The younger men carried themselves. Some with great effort.

They were mostly marines and army boys. There was one airman there, and they all imme-

**He wanted big, wild fish. He was up for it. "Let me at 'em, sir."**

diately started busting him, giving him the nickname "Air Force." They spoke to each other easily and laughed. They spoke to us stiffly and sparingly. Our goal for the morning was the basic fly cast, an action that can be performed with prosthetic limbs or from a wheelchair.

Most of the soldiers were in their early 20s, but there was one lieutenant who had served multiple tours: the old man, perhaps 30. When he spoke, all heads turned. The Lieutenant picked up his rod

first. The others were quick to follow.

The guides fell into our known routines of instruction; teaching is a big part of what we do. It was the first moment all day that I felt in my element. I couldn't imagine how it was for those boys. I have no frame of reference for what they know.

Once the loops started tailing, the gulf of experience between us shrank. The Sergeant and I began to draw each other out, as people with mutual purpose and similar interests sometimes can. By the time the matriarchal volunteers ("mothers," as they're called in the program) responsible for feeding these boys served lunch, the Sergeant and I had begun trading stories, fish for fish. He grew up in California, fished salmon commercially, mated on charter boats, knew all about catching Humboldt squid.

"You don't want to catch the first one, sir. They hang down below a hundred feet, but the school will follow the first one up; then you can catch 'em on the surface."

After lunch, we took the soldiers to private stocked ponds and let them pull on finless rainbows and build confidence. The Sergeant spent hours circling a pond, stepping through dense cattails, a cigar clamped in his grin. I stood beside him with the net and replaced the flies when they got stuck in dense seedpods or tangled from casting. The Sergeant cracked dirty jokes while I was disentangling or re-rigging to deflect his discomfort with assistance.

The pond of stockers was a good warm-up, but it wasn't challenging, and the Sergeant wanted something he could scale. He wanted big, wild fish. He was up for it. "Let me at 'em, sir."

**T**oday we got on Nelsons Spring Creek, where the Sergeant found the fish he sought. We did it right, moving into position with slow purpose, staying low and sighting the ones we wanted, the ones he is currently working.

"Clear now, sir?"

"All clear."

The next cast isn't pretty, but the line doesn't tangle and he keeps the shadow off the fish. This time his placement is perfect. The lead fish's mouth flashes just as the point fly drifts to him. I tell the Sergeant to set, but he has seen it himself and his

*Continued on page 92*

---

## Angling

*Continued from page 81*

rod is already coming up. The brown does a subsurface rodeo flip and spins downstream, heading for the far bank with low-hanging branches.

“Easy on that line. It ain’t offshore gear.”

The Sergeant is silent playing his first brown trout, a wild, angry fish pushing two feet, on unfamiliar gear. It makes the far bank, wraps around a submerged limb or mat of weed, and pulls free.

There is nothing useful I can say in this moment. Later, after he has hooked and lost both the remaining browns in the hole, I will tell him how damned impressed I am. I will tell him that I know seasoned anglers who can’t get on those fish without spooking them, much less get them to eat. It will not matter, and I will feel terrible.

I will continue to feel terrible and wonder about my choice of locales until several days later, when we’re all together at a farewell dinner. After some joking, the Lieutenant will stand and give a speech through his glass throat. In his hands will be a folded, sun-bleached American flag. He will explain that this flag was the last flown on a particular base in Iraq before it closed. He will present this flag to one of the “mothers” as a gesture of appreciation. Her husband died on that base.

I will look to the Sergeant and we will both have streaks on our faces, and I will have something of substance to feel terrible about. ■

---

*Miles Nolte volunteers for Warriors and Quiet Waters, a Montana-based program for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For more information, please visit [warriorsandquietwaters.org](http://warriorsandquietwaters.org).*

