

Wounded Warrior Ready to Return to Fight

By Emily Athens/Special to American Forces Press Service

SCHWEINFURT, Dec. 23, 2008 - Danger lurks on every stretch of road in Iraq with the prospect of roadside bombs, which have taken a terrible toll on those serving downrange. Army Spc. Jake Altman knows very well the destruction they can cause.

After serving two years in the Army, Altman deployed in 2006 with 9th Engineer Battalion, 172nd Infantry Brigade, stationed just north of Baghdad at Camp Taji.

"Altman was hard-working. He was self-assured and got along with everyone," Army Spc. Jason Ogarro said. Army Sgt. Corey Blatchford, a friend of Altman's since they were stationed together in Bamberg, Germany, added that Altman was an eager worker in Iraq and pushed himself as far as a soldier should.

But five months into the deployment, on the morning of May 14, 2007, Altman's life changed.

"I remember him coming in, and he actually said to me 'I don't feel well today.' He actually felt like something wasn't right," Blatchford said. Altman left on a route-clearance mission that morning, operating a Husky, a single-occupant vehicle equipped to detect mines and improvised explosive devices.

"I was the lead vehicle scouting for IEDs and letting the guys behind me know what's up ahead," he recalled. "About three hours into it, I came across one. I saw it for about a split second. I called it, and then all of a sudden, it blew up," Altman said, trailing off.

A piercing bang, the harsh smell of explosives, and an overwhelming cloud of dust proved the unfortunate success of yet another insurgent attack. Altman suffered severe shrapnel wounds to his legs and the loss of his right arm at the elbow.

Immediately after the explosion, Altman tried desperately to smash his M-16 rifle through the glass window so he could get out of the vehicle, but he was unsuccessful because of space limitations and injuries.

"I was awake through the entire ordeal. I was completely conscious. There was a lot of pain and a lot of anger," he said.

Although in tremendous pain and agony, Altman could not help but think what only heroes perceive during this type of emergency.

"I was actually glad it was me. If I would have missed it, it would've hit a truck full of guys. That explosion would have killed everybody in the truck," he said.

Despite any initial frustrations, Altman has come to terms with his wounds and has vowed to "keep pushing through it."

After a year and a half of recovery and physical therapy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Altman returned to the 9th Engineer Battalion here, continuing his service and eager to take on future challenges. He has decided to deploy once again, and will readily leave Schweinfurt in January, fulfilling his desire to "stay in the fight."

"Personally, I want to do this for myself," he said. "I'm not proving it to anybody else that I can do this. I'm doing it just for me."

Remaining in the military was not an easy undertaking for Altman, Ogarro explained. After several attempts, Altman finally spoke to the right people and was allowed to continue his service.

"I've had to fight to stay in the military, because this is what I want to do," he said. "I don't really feel impaired. I can always find a way around it," he said, noting his quick adjustment to his injuries.

Altman's prosthetic hand limits him to grabbing things, closing, and rotating his new hand. The ability to twist his prosthetic hand completely around is a talent that he finds useful when he wants to "mess with people," he explained with a smile, demonstrating that although he lost a hand, he did not lose his spirit. See **Altman, Page 8**



Army Spc. Jake Altman, wounded during his first deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2007, is preparing to re-join his unit in Iraq. U.S. Army photo by Emily Athens

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