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HQ, ASC Public Affairs Office
1 Rock Island Arsenal
Rock Island, Ill. 61299
(309)782-5421

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Story and photos by Galen Putnam, 402nd AFSB Public Affairs

Wounded Warriors return to Iraq, share experiences

JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq – “I got out of the Bradley with my left arm in my right hand.”

That’s how retired Staff Sgt. Brian Neuman recounted the incident that led to his return to Iraq, along with eight other Wounded Warriors, as part of Operation Proper Exit.

The April 9 visit offered the Soldiers -- some still active, some medically retired -- the opportunity to go full-circle regarding the wounds that precipitated their sudden, and unexpected, return home.

Their day here included a visit to the 1st Battalion, 402nd Army Field Support Brigade, where they had the opportunity to check out the Army’s state-of-the-art armored vehicles.

“I was in Bravo Company, 9th Psyops (Psychological Operations) Battalion, and was attached to [the] 1st Marine Division supporting the area in and around Fallujah. I got hurt on November 11, which is Veterans Day, 2004,” said Neuman who spent nine months recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. and the Army’s only other amputee treatment facility at Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston, in San Antonio, Texas.

“We were in the city about four days before I got hurt. It was about noon when the vehicle was hit with an EFP (Explosively Formed Penetrator). Up to that point we had gotten hit with about 10 to 15 RPGs

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April 23, 2010

(Rocket-Propelled Grenades), but they just bounced off the vehicle. This thing did a little bit more damage. It came right through the back gate, took my arm off, came right across my chest, cut my magazines and my 9 millimeter [pistol] in half and proceeded to hit my interpreter -- it went right through him -- and went into the turret where it cooked off some 25 millimeter rounds then exited. It was pretty nasty whatever it was.”

Despite the harrowing experience, Neuman remains upbeat.

“I can’t say it was the worst day of my life. It definitely wasn’t the most fun I’ve ever had. It was difficult getting pulled out of the fight, not by choice, but it is great to be able to come back,” he said. “This also gives us the opportunity to share our experiences with the Soldiers currently serving over here. If any servicemember or unit leadership gets anything out of our stories, that makes the whole thing worth it.”

The Wounded Warriors enjoyed viewing the new-generation Panther, Stryker and MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) armored vehicles that are retrofitted and repaired by the Soldiers, Department of the Army civilians and contract employees of the 1st Bn., 402nd AFSB.

“It’s good to see the Army is making a concerted effort to improve the vehicles that Soldiers rely on for protection,” said retired Sgt. 1st Class Michael Schlitz, who was burned over 85 percent of his body and lost both hands while conducting road clearing operations. “It is a natural progression. We started out with soft-skinned Humvees and progressed to up-armored Humvees -- now we’ve got these. We are definitely moving in the right direction. These are some awesome vehicles.”

Battalion personnel were glad to have an opportunity to showcase their vehicles.

“Number one, it is a humbling experience when you meet someone who has been injured serving their country. These Soldiers have sacrificed a lot,” said Lynden Lawson, Stryker program manager representative with JACOBS Technologies. “They asked a lot of questions and were particularly interested in the improvements. They were glad to see that Soldiers are better protected today.”

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Schlitz described the day that changed his life.

“When we were hit, I was thrown from the Humvee,” he said. “I didn’t know I was on fire at the time. I didn’t see my guys moving so I ran back for my guys. Unfortunately, I didn’t make it because when I reached the vehicle, the flames hit my face. I took my IBA (Interceptor Body Armor) off and tried to hit the ground to roll. I did about a roll and-a-half before my body locked up on me and I was basically face down in the dirt just burning until someone hit me with a fire extinguisher. Unfortunately my crew wasn’t as lucky. I lost my driver, my gunner and my medic in that incident.”

Schlitz said participating in Operation Proper Exit, sponsored by the Troops First Foundation and supported by the USO, has provided closure.

“I’m glad to be able to come because I’ve had the opportunity to go back and see where I got hurt, see how Iraq has changed and see the changes in the Iraqi people themselves,” he said. “They are now doing things for themselves; their government is getting up and running. There is just a whole new atmosphere here that we can all be proud of. That’s a win for us. That’s exactly what we wanted. That’s why we came here in the first place.”

The group made a number of other stops, including the Air Force Theater Hospital through which most of the group were originally evacuated. They also participated in a town hall meeting where they shared their experiences with the Joint Base Balad community.

“This is a very good program that offers the Wounded Warriors a chance for closure,” said Command Sgt. Maj. James E. Case, 1st Bn., 402nd AFSB, command sergeant major. “It was an honor to have them on our footprint and to be able to show them the improvements and different levels of armor and upgrades that have been made to our vehicles.”

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For queries, contact the Army Sustainment Command Public Affairs Office at rock-amsas-pa@conus.army.mil or by phone at 309-782-5421.

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