

Wounded Officer Leads By Example

WTC Deputy Chief of Staff Uses Determination, Desire to Keep Moving Forward

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"What would you do to get to whatever future you think you've earned, [and] how far do you want to go?"

These were questions Lt. Col. Danny Dudek asked members of the Warrior Transition Brigade (WTB) at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) as he addressed them in the base gymnasium on June 7.

"You have to work for it and it takes commitment, discipline and a desire to overcome things, which often take teamwork," Dudek said.

The combat veteran with more than 20 years of service speaks from experience.

"He's been there and done that," said WTB brigade surgeon, Col. George Kyle, in attendance at the event. "What he has done and is doing with his life and career is impressive," the colonel added. "If we take out a page from his play book, it would help us as individuals and an organization, and it would help us as we assist others to heal."

Dudek is currently Warrior Transition Command deputy chief of staff. He sat in a wheelchair as he told his story to WTB members at Walter Reed Bethesda last week.

"My story is much like your story," Dudek said. "It has a lot of variables, but some things are the same. For me, telling my story is therapeutic and keeps other people's names alive. Telling my story helps me heal and recover."

A native of Wilmington, N.C., Dudek was a field artillery officer serving in Iraq in 2007 with the 4th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. On July 19 of that year, an explosively formed penetrating improvised device, detonated under his Stryker vehicle. It caused him severe spinal cord injury, and killed Cpl. Brandon M. Craig, 25, from Maryland. "He will always be with me," Dudek said.

After being injured, Dudek was able to get on his radio and call in air support. He was air evacuated to a combat support hospital, and was in surgery within an hour of the blast. "That kind of speed is incredible, and from that start, I [received] incredibly, great, supportive health care from a Department of Defense and my country doing everything it could do to get me back."

The lieutenant colonel was flown to Germany, and then to the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) in Washington, D.C., within three days of being injured in Iraq. He remained at WRAMC for about a month, before going back to his home at Joint Base Lewis-McChord for more rehabilitation.

Bed-ridden for almost three months, Dudek eventually was able to stand again, and can now do limited walking with the aid of crutches and braces. He explained he faced a lot of frustrations, "but did the best he could to keep pushing forward."

"There was a goal at the end," the lieutenant colonel said. One goal was to see his favorite football team, the Chicago Bears, play a game. He got that opportunity when the Bears played the Seattle Seahawks in Seattle, Wash., and he went to the game. "That was what got me out of the hospital, being able to be on the field with the Chicago Bears."

Another goal of Dudek's was to go to his welcome home ceremony. "I was able to stand and talk with some of the guys in the vehicle with me when it was blown up. Those are the things most important to me, being with the Soldiers and people I enjoy."

He was able to spend more time with those Soldiers when he had an opportunity to become Joint Base Lewis-McChord's Warrior Transition Battalion's executive officer, and then its commander in 2009. He was responsible for about 600 Soldiers with long-term or complex medical issues as the battalion commander.

Dudek explained the Army had to make a deliberate decision to let him, "a paralyzed lieutenant colonel," command a battalion, but he also had to show his leaders he had "the commitment not to let them down."

He spent two years in that position, and said he learned as much as he could to share with his troops. "I tried to give many of the Soldiers I had as much as I could some of the good lessons that I learned. I asked questions, I talked with my providers, and I stayed constantly engaged in what was going on [with my care]."

Despite his involvement in his care, Dudek said there were times when frustration surfaced that he could not overcome alone. "All these things that I felt were obstacles I had put in front of me, even at this point, starting to melt away when other people started to explain to me why I was wrong." He said this was how he became involved in adaptive sports and the Warrior Games, athletic competitions for wounded troops.

Last year, participating in his first Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Dudek earned three gold medals and one silver medal in swimming, competing with approximately 200 athletes from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guards and Great Britain military. At this year's Warrior Games last month, Dudek earned gold medals in the 50-meter freestyle, 100-meter freestyle and 50-meter backstroke.

In addition to swimming, athletes also compete in sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, cycling, track and field, archery and competitive shooting during the Warrior Games.

Dudek described the experience as "awesome with great competition." He has also participated in other adaptive conditioning activities, including hand-cycle races, triathlons, and two Army Ten-Milers.

"Every time I go out to Colorado Springs, or every time I come here [to Walter Reed Bethesda], I get to meet amazing people who are taking whatever situation they are in, and making the best of it," Dudek said.

He explained that since his paralysis, he puts himself "outside of his comfort zone" when he goes out in public, and still has to overcome some anxiety, but he does so with the help of others.

The Army officer added one of the things he's most proud of in his career, is being the principle author of the Army's Comprehensive Training Plan (CTP), which serves as the heart of the Warrior Care and Transition Program. Every Soldier recovering at a Warrior Transition Unit develops a personalized plan that will lead them back to active duty, or a successful transition to civilian life.

"No one knows better than you where you want to end up," Dudek added. "You have to articulate that to people. It's not really about them, but about you. You [have] to get outside your comfort zone to articulate to the people around you [the help you may need], and understand the processes around you. You're not going to do it alone; it takes us all."