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Soldier tours 9/11 Museum to revisit day that changed his life

West Point, New York —As he stepped onto the streets of Manhattan, Isaac Rios found himself in New York City for the first time in years—before the world-shattering event of 9/11. The Brooklyn native— Coney Island, to be exact— joined about 130 fellow Soldiers, Marines and Veterans, all a part of the 2014 U.S. Army Warrior Trials, in a trip on June 14 to The National September 11 Memorial Museum. The visit, which coincided with the Army birthday, brought back memories that are never too far from the surface for Rios anyway.

Rios, along with more than 100 wounded, ill and injured service members and Veterans from across the United States are at West Point to compete in the Army Warrior Trials, June 15-19. The event is hosted by Warrior Command and includes athletes from the Army, Marines and Air Force facing off in archery, basketball, cycling, track and field, swimming, shooting, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball.

“Each and every single big picture that they had (of the World Trade Center attack), it gives you the memory of what you were doing; I can remember everything I was doing at that time, and the feelings that you felt when you saw that picture— it was the same pictures that they showed in the news,” said Rios, a staff sergeant from the Warrior Transition Battalion, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. “It felt like your heart dropped.”

The photos took Rios back to Sept. 11, 2001, to being stationed at Camp Greaves, Korea, to getting alerted and pulling guard duty, to two tumultuous days of waiting to hear if his family was alive.

“I was so worried about my family, my kids; just in the back of my mind, I wanted to know where they were, and for two days I couldn’t contact anyone,” said Rios, who in 2001 had a newborn son and daughters who were then 2 and 5 years old.

When he finally got that phone call, 6800 miles and an ocean away, and found out that his family was okay, Rios said, “That was like relief.”

Even nearly 13 years later, recalling the event is emotional for him.

“Just hearing my kids...” Rios trailed off. “It was hard—not knowing where my family was, not knowing where my kids were; it just took a toll on me. Actually, it changed the way I acted, and it made me mature a lot,” he said.

“It made me reevaluate the things that weren’t important. It matured me in a way that I wasn’t expecting, just the way I acted, my attitude, what was really important,” said Rios. He found that the attacks on 9/11, and the chance that his family might not have made it, transformed how he viewed his military service.

“For the combat to be brought to your front door, it was something that I never expected, especially right at my front door. I was in the five boroughs; it could have been anywhere, anywhere closer to where the other half of my family was,” he said.

Rios, who joined the Army in 1996, developed a deeper level of dedication to being a Soldier.

“For me, serving since 9/11 meant so much... I couldn’t see myself doing anything else other than being a Soldier. It was just that important,” said Rios. He deployed eight times to places like Bosnia, Djibouti and Kosovo. It was in Iraq and



Afghanistan, though, that Rios would get injured three times from small arms, explosives and mortars, resulting in multiple injuries over the years. What sent him home, though, was a traumatic brain injury caused by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan.

The years of combat deployments took their toll on him, affecting his family, his body and his way of life. But Rios kept going back downrange as long as he could.

“You’re there to make sure the guy next to you and all your guys come back, as many of them as possible come back without a scratch, so they can get home to their families,” he said.

Rios took that sense of camaraderie with him when he went to the 9/11 Museum with the guys next to him at the Warrior Trials— the Army’s adaptive reconditioning competition to compile its Warrior Games team— finding that confronting the event that changed his life in every way was easier with his fellow Soldiers by his side.

“Going with these types of Soldiers, for people who have been through the same thing I’ve been through, the constant struggle of combat, it makes a big difference,” Rios said.

At the museum, Rios found himself halting at first, overwhelmed by the crowd. But then he made his way through the memorial, just taking in the exhibits honoring his fellow New Yorkers who lost their lives that day.

“You see the pictures, and you see the people, read their names, their age— there were some people there, they hadn’t even begun their life. It was just taken,” Rios said. He felt the anger from almost 13 years ago resurface due to the attack on his city, his country.

Although Rios won’t be returning to combat, and in fact is expecting to medically retire from the Army, he still plans to continue saving his fellow Soldiers when he gets out, this time from themselves.

“I want to work with other wounded Soldiers and show them that when once you get hurt, time doesn’t stop. I see a lot of people who are hurt get down on themselves and they just slowly start fading away,” he said. He plans to become an adaptive reconditioning trainer, since it was sports that brought him out of himself after his injuries and after he realized he was off of the fast track in his Army career.

“If I could just work with people and change one person, that would make a huge difference. Change one person’s mind, one at a time, that’s what happened with me— somebody changed my mind,” said Rios.

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CUTLINE: Staff Sgt. Isaac Rios is a native of New York City, N.Y., who visited the 9/11 Memorial Museum there on the Army's birthday on June 14, 2014. Rios is participating in the 2014 U.S. Army Warrior Trials at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., June 15-19, 2014. He is assigned to the Joint Base Lewis-McChord Warrior Transition Battalion. (Photo by Suzanne Ovel, Madigan Army Medical Center Public Affairs)

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Warrior Transition Command (WTC) is a major subordinate command under the U.S. Army Medical Command (MEDCOM). WTC's mission is to develop, coordinate and integrate the Army's Warrior Care and Transition Program (WCTP) for wounded, ill and injured soldiers, veterans and their families. For more information on WTC, visit the new WTC website, www.WTC.army.mil, follow on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/armyWTC> or join Facebook at <http://facebook.com/armyWTC>.

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