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WOUNDED SOLDIER RETURNS TO ITALY TO GREET COMRADES AS THEY COME HOME FROM AFGHANISTAN DEPLOYMENT

By **Dave Melancon**

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VICENZA, Italy -- July has been a month of homecomings for Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team as they return here from a 15-month deployment in Afghanistan.

Spc. Jesse A. Murphree of Destined Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), reversed that Afghanistan to Italy airflow July 22 when he traveled from the United States to rejoin his unit as they arrived at Aviano Air Base, Italy.

The "Rock Battalion" infantryman was among the first to greet the approximately 400 Soldiers from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 173rd ABCT and the 503rd's 1st and 2nd Battalions, on the air base flight line.



DAVE MELANCON

Spc. Jesse A. Murphree, Destined Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), greets his 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team comrades returning from deployment in Afghanistan, on the flight line at Aviano Air Base, Italy, July 22. Murphree lost his legs in an improvised explosive device attack in the Korengal Valley, near Ali Abad, Afghanistan, Dec. 27, 2007, and has been undergoing treatment at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

He shook their hands while standing on two artificial legs, steadying himself with a cane.

Murphree, 22, served as a gunner on an up-armored Humvee. His platoon was overwatching another platoon during a mounted patrol in the Korengal Valley, near Ali Abad, Afghanistan, two days after Christmas 2007. As his convoy was preparing to move, his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device.

Murphree said he has few memories of the explosion. He lost his legs below his knees and suffered minor burns in the incident. Two other Soldiers were also injured in the attack.

Medically evacuated from Afghanistan, he arrived at Walter Reed Army Medical Center Dec. 30.

“I was hit on the 27th and woke up in Walter Reed on New Year’s Day,” he said as he awaited the first of two aircraft bringing his comrades home.

Murphree arrived in Italy July 20 and said he plans to stay until the first week of August to welcome the remaining 173rd Soldiers. Upon arrival at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, he was greeted by other Destined Company Soldiers, including his former platoon and section sergeants and two other Soldiers who were wounded in earlier incidents.

“I was looking forward to that feeling you get when you see everyone all happy because they just got done with a deployment. I came back for that feeling,” he said. “I’ve always been thinking about what is going on and worrying. I definitely miss being around all of the guys.”

He is staying in the Caserma Ederle Warrior Transition Unit quarters.

“It is pretty hooked up,” Murphree said of his lodging at the WTU. “They are accessible; there are ramps and a shower that works for me.”

Murphree says this is the longest trip he has taken since arriving at Walter Reed. He has made three other three-day trips in that time -- to his hometown in Colorado, a Texas fishing trip hosted by the 173d Airborne Brigade Association, and a Memorial Day celebration in Pennsylvania.

He said he continues his routine of frequent stretching exercises and walking on his prosthetic legs here, adding that his two-week stay in Italy does not interfere with his treatment. In fact he says it’s a plus.

“This is actually better for me,” Murphree explained. “That’s pretty much what I am doing here. I am walking around a lot. Being on my legs is doing more than therapy would do.”

“I’m well past the critical stage of therapy,” he said. “You have to keep your core strength up. You have to build tolerance and confidence in your legs.”

The reunion night's agenda included going into town with friends and around the Vicenza military community, he said. "We'll have some drinks and stuff, go hang out and have a good time."

Later plans include returning to Vicenza in September for the 173rd's formal welcome-home ceremony and celebration, he said.

Murphree, who is still on active duty, said he will continue his treatment at Walter Reed while undergoing the Medical Evaluation Board process. He expects to be medically retired from the Army in February 2009.

"You can never predict how long you are going to be there, because there are always bumps in the road," he said.

He said he is considering attending college and studying counterterrorism, English or public speaking, and possibly psychology. Plans also include taking up competitive mono-skiing, a sport that resembles snowboarding.



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Spc. Jesse A. Murphree, Destined Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), talks with members of his platoon during the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team's return from a 15-month deployment to Afghanistan July 22.

Murphree's return to Italy, where he spent his first and only Army assignment, is an inspiration and strength for all 173rd ABCT Soldiers and the Vicenza military community, said Capt. Matthew J. Heimerle, the 2-503rd rear detachment commander.

"To see him in person lifts everybody's spirit," he said. "Murphree will never quit on his ambitions and goals and will forever be a source of inspiration for the Soldiers of the Battalion."

Heimerle said there were no difficulties in arranging for Murphree's reunion. Community and battalion leaders cleared the visit with doctors at Walter Reed and ensured there was a place for him to stay in the community and that his medical needs were met.

“This has been an extremely tough deployment for all in this battalion,” Heimerle said. “Every one of us has lost close, close friends, and to see someone like Murphree get hurt the way he did and recover the way he has, and will continue to do, gives everyone a huge morale boost.”

“To me his attitude, motivation, and character epitomize the young Soldiers that are in today’s Army and it also reflects our core Army values,” he said. “Guys like Murphree are the ones that should be talked about in the news.”

“It was good to see that he is alright,” said Sgt. Nathan Thomas, the emergency medical technician who treated Murphree in the Korengal Valley.

It's also good for Murphree to see his friends, Thomas added. “He has been in Walter Reed for so long,” the medic said.

The entire Destined Company -- especially his friends -- are boosting Murphree’s morale, Thomas said.

“I’m not helping him. We are helping him,” Thomas said. “This is our little band of brothers sticking together.”

Scout team members Spc. Mitchell Raeon and Spc. Jay Liske, who witnessed the explosion, said they plan to get together with Murphree during his visit.

“He looked good,” Raeon said. “We have not seen him in about 10 months, so we did not know what to expect.”

“I can’t wait to drink a beer with him tonight,” added Liske.

“It’s been incredible to see my buddies come back. It is one of the feelings I’ve been waiting for,” Murphree said as 18 busloads of Soldiers pulled away from the flight line for the two-hour ride from Aviano to Vicenza. “You sit there at the hospital and you think constantly about your guys and what is going on. And when you finally get to see them and you know that they are OK, it is definitely awesome.”



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