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Wounded 9th Engineer Battalion Soldier returns to service, plans to rejoin unit in Iraq

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SCHWEINFURT, Germany -- Improvised explosive devices have taken a terrible toll on servicemembers in Iraq -- a fact Spc. Jake Altman knows all too well.



EMILY ATHENS

Despite the loss of an arm during his first deployment, Spc. Jake Altman of Bravo Company, 9th Engineer Battalion, is preparing to re-join his unit in Iraq.

In 2006, after serving two years in the Army, Altman deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom with Bravo Company, 9th Engineer Battalion. The battalion, part of U.S. Army Europe's 172nd Infantry Brigade, was stationed just north of Baghdad at Camp Taji.

There, the specialist's colleagues say, he impressed them with his drive.

"Altman was hard-working. He was self-assured and got along with everyone," said Spc. Jason Ogarro.

Sgt. Corey Blatchford, Altman's comrade since the pair was stationed together in Bamberg, Germany, said Altman was an eager worker in Iraq and pushed himself as far as a Soldier should.

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.

"I was the lead vehicle, scouting for IEDs and letting the guys behind me know what (was) up ahead. 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.

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

Immediately after the explosion, Altman said, he tried desperately to smash his M16 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.

Despite the pain, Altman said what went through his mind was that the bomb could no longer endanger his buddies.

"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.

Frustrated at first by his injuries, Altman said he has come to terms with his wounds and vowed to keep going.

After a year and a half of recovery and physical therapy at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Altman returned to the 9th Engineers, and has chosen to deploy again. He will depart Schweinfurt in January.

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

Remaining in the military was not easy, Ogarro said, but he persevered and was finally allowed to continue his service.

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

The dexterity of Altman's prosthetic arm 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 said with a smile.

"He's had a good sense of humor before and after. That's something he definitely didn't lose," Ogarro said. "I asked him to give me a hand, and I knew I set myself up. He popped it off and gave it to me."

Altman's determination motivates other Soldiers, Blatchford said.

"It shows the other Soldiers that even if you have something happen, you still can come down and fight hard and still defend your country. It's courageous ... If he can do it without an arm, why can't I do it with two arms?" the sergeant asked.

Altman said he is looking forward to his coming deployment and his continued service with a bit of trepidation, but with no regrets or resentment.

"I am a little nervous, but I want this," he said of going back to Iraq. "The military really is for me."



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