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ARMY MEDICINE DOESN'T JUST SAVE LIVES, IT GIVES LIVES

By Gini Sinclair

On a May day in 2006, one Soldier's life changed forever—and nearly ended.

"I almost died several times," said Col. Gregory Gadson, about the minutes and first few hours after his vehicle hit an IED in Iraq, causing severe injuries to both his legs and his right arm. "But now, six years later, I am flourishing, still on active duty, with a good quality of life expectation." He was serving as commander of the 2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery in Iraq at the time of his injury. Today he serves as installation commander of Fort Belvoir, Va.

Gadson began his odyssey from the site of the IED blast in Balad, Iraq on 7 May to a combat support hospital in Bagdad; from there he was flown to Landstuhl Military Medical Center in Germany, and finally on to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Gadson says he doesn't remember much of the trip. "I went through 129 units of whole blood and plasma that first night," he said. "By 11 May I was in Walter Reed. I don't remember Landstuhl at all," he said.

After arriving at WRAMC Gadson spent 44 days as an in-patient. Gadson eventually lost both legs above the knee and today has reduced use of his right arm due to his upper right arm and right elbow being broken.

"I've had 16 surgeries on my legs," Gadson said, "and four on my arm. I still have some nerve damage. I've talked to some people who think they can make it better. But, for now I don't plan on any more surgery," he said.

Gadson said he relied on friends and family as his primary support group during his recovery. And the Army's support system for Wounded Warriors was there for him when he needed it.

Part of that support included Col. (Dr.) Paul Pasquina, currently Chair, Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Services at the Uniformed Services University, Bethesda, Md. Pasquina and Gadson were teammates on the football team at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. During the early part of Gadson's hospitalization, Pasquina served as the Chief of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation at WRAMC, and supervised much of his treatment.

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“On many levels,” said Pasquina, “Gadson is an example to all of us, for his hard work, determination, and resilience. We played football together. Then, I knew him as an invincible athlete. Now, he’s inspiring to be around, and I feel privileged to care for him.”

During the 15 months of recovery, Gadson said he focused more on occupational therapy because it helps patients re-learn the skills needed for everyday life. Today, Gadson said he is more active than he was before his injuries. “I am a better skier now,” he noted, “before I didn’t really ski, but now I do. Because of the prosthetics you have to do some things differently when you’re skiing,” he said. As well as being a skier, Gadson is a scuba diver; he is also into cycling, traveling, and photography.

While still recovering, he signed up for a graduate education program. Today Gadson holds masters degrees in information management from Webster University and policy management from Georgetown University.

“I’m just trying to continue to serve,” Gadson said. “I’ve been promoted. And I was selected for a command position. I just make the most of every day,” he said.

Gadson was a line backer on the football team when he attended West Point. A friend of his from the West Point football team, Mike Sullivan, now works for the New York Giants as an assistant coach. Sullivan arranged for Gadson to attend a game. Tom Coughlin, the New York Giants head coach, asked Gadson to meet with the then-struggling team. Gadson talked to the players about service, teamwork, duty, perseverance, and adversity. The team broke out of a losing streak and Gadson has served as their mentor ever since.

Gadson’s photograph appeared in a January 2010 story about robotics in “National Geographic.” Peter Berg, one of the producers for the movie “Battleship” saw the photograph and got the idea to cast Gadson in the show. The movie was filmed in Hawaii and Louisiana and released on May 18, 2012. It featured aliens coming to Earth with hostile intent. Gadson played an Army officer in Hawaii, who takes on the aliens Rambo-style.

“It was a good experience,” he said, “but I think I’ll wait until I retire before I do any more movies”.

As a 24-year career Army officer Gadson said he was familiar with the Army medical system before his injuries. However, spending time as a Wounded Warrior the last seven years made him realize the true capabilities of the system. “I can honestly think of no other medical system in the world that can take such great care of some of the sickest folks there are,” he said. “The thing that is significant about this generation of medical practitioners is that they are saving lives at an unprecedented rate. The military medical system not only saved my life,” said Gadson, “but has allowed me to be all I can be. It’s about more than saving lives—it’s giving lives back.”

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“The military health care system is a very dynamic organization,” said Pasquina. “Military training programs are some of the best in the world. We provide unique training for military specific duties, and top notch education in medical specialties.”

“We are all driven,” said Pasquina, “by a higher calling to serve in a very rewarding profession. I’m very proud of my Army service and my ability to provide care to the patient. A career in the military offers opportunities for professional growth and to work alongside other professions. There is a high degree of camaraderie that can’t be overstated. It’s very rare to find a military health care person who is motivated by the salary; providing superior patient care is what drives us the most.”

For more information on an Army Medicine career, call 1-888-710-Army, or visit www.goarmy.com/amedd.

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Outline:

Col. Gregory Gadson takes part in a Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) 5K awareness run at Fort Belvoir, Md. Gadson is a double amputee as a result of injuries suffered in Iraq and serves as the installation commander at Fort Belvoir.

Photo credit: U.S. Army photo

