



Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

We change lives and make people smile!

BLINDED BY WAR:

EYE INJURIES CAST TROOPS INTO DARKNESS

Guest Opinion

by Tom Iselin, executive director, Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

January 23, 2007

A mortar is a muzzle-loading weapon that fires grenade-like shells at low velocities over short ranges. On September 2, 2006, the sun glared and the dust blew in Yusufiyah, Iraq. In the early afternoon, First Lieutenant Ivan Castro sat crouched behind a brick slab on a roof top providing sniper support for his fellow soldiers.

Castro was scanning the horizon as he had for hours when, all of a sudden, a whirling sound cracked the sky. Before he could move for cover, a mortar landed five feet from him and exploded.

The blast sent large metal shards and thousands of tiny metal fragments into the air, killing two fellow soldiers instantly. Pounds of razor-sharp shrapnel tore into the left side of Castro. The explosion crushed his jaw, broke his arm, collapsed his lung, and damaged his shoulder.

Unconscious for days, Castro finally came to at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. With his wife Evelyn at his side, he woke to find out he had only one eye and hopes were slim to save it.

The blast shattered his protective eyewear, driving broken pieces of plastic along with shrapnel, into his eyes. After a failed surgery to save Castro's remaining eye, the former Army Ranger, at age of 40, with 18 years of service, was blind.

The incidence and percentage of eye injuries in war has increased significantly in the past century as a percentage of all combat battle injuries evacuated from war zones. During the Civil War, about 1% of all battle injures evacuated from battle fields were eye injures. In World War I, it was 2%. In World War II, it was 4.5%. In Vietnam, it was 9%. In Operation Desert Storm, it was 13%.

In Iraq, the eye casualty rate has grown to 16%. Two reasons are cited for this, one is increased survival rates due to body armor, the second is increased use of land mines, mortars, and various explosive devices that propel high velocity fragmentation projectiles.

As of December 25, 2007, a total of 28,467 service members have been wounded in Iraq. The average age of those wounded is 28, 98% are male, 56% are married, and 21.5% have more than three sites of trauma.



The number of wounded that required air medical evacuation was 8,498, of which, 1,162, or 16%, had sustained combat eye trauma. More than 100 of the War's wounded are legally blind. Walter Reed Medical Center reports another 247 are blind in one eye.

But the astounding figure is the number of wounded that have suffered some type of visual dysfunction due to a traumatic brain injury (TBI). The estimate is 4,000. Only post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) are more common combat injuries. Amputations, severe burns, and paralysis rank lower.

The good news? More eyes are saved because of the increased response time to care for the wounded. In World War II, it took an average of 36 to 48 hours before eye surgery occurred for a wounded soldier. Today, the average is less than an hour.

The Department of Defense, the VA system, and organizations such as the Blinded Veterans Association are working together to do everything possible to rehabilitate service members with eye injuries. They provide prosthetic devices, physical therapy, and occupational therapy. They also provide family, work, and school services.

However, if you talk with wounded service members, the majority will tell you the most fun and effective form of therapy is sports and recreation. Many blind service members were once top athletes and sports enthusiasts. Even blind, they are driven to be able to do the sports they once loved to do before their injuries, and attempt new sports they've never tried.

The mission of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is to use sports and recreation as a means of therapy and healing to enrich the lives of people with disabilities. On January 26, SVAS will host the nation's first snowsports camp specifically designed for blind service members. They will be skiing, snowboarding, Nordic skiing, ice skating, and snowshoeing. They will also get a chance to go paragliding.

In addition to building physical skills and self-confidence, the purpose of the camp is to inspire the blind warriors to have renewed hope and belief in themselves. If successful, the warriors will return home with life skills and a meaningful experience that leads to improved relationships; improved performance at work and school; increased ability to face the challenges of blindness; and increased ability to cope with combat-related stress.

"I've never been on a snowboard or pair of skis," said Castro during a call. "My goal for the snowsports camp is try new things so I can enjoy the same sports as my 14-year-old son. I want to be a fun dad, even if I'm blind."

When you see brave young men like Ivan Castro around town this week, be sure to thank them for their service and encourage them in the sports they're undertaking. Their vision of hope and inspiration—and what can be achieved—is often clearer than ours.

~ ~ ~

