



AMERICAN FORCES PRESS SERVICE
NEWS ARTICLES

Face of Defense: Wounded in Iraq, National Guardsman Wants to Return

By Samantha L. Quigley
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21, 2008 – For an Arkansas Army National Guardsman, the war in Iraq came to an abrupt end in the alley of a Baghdad neighborhood on June 13, 2004.

Then-Sgt. Kevin Pannell was on a routine foot patrol with his unit in Sadr City, a Baghdad neighborhood, when insurgents lobbed two hand grenades at the group. The grenades landed near him and exploded, knocking him off his feet and mangling both of his legs.

“I was never knocked out, so my medic wouldn’t let me go to sleep -- because when you go to sleep, shock sets in,” Pannell said.

That changed when he arrived at the U.S. military hospital in Baghdad, however. The doctors there put him into a medically induced coma.

“It’s kind of surreal, because you don’t remember that. It doesn’t seem like it really happened,” he said. “To me, I went to sleep in Baghdad and woke up two minutes later.”

In fact, it was eight days before Pannell awoke at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here to find doctors had amputated his right leg below the knee and his left leg above the knee.

Two prosthetic legs and plenty of physical therapy have Pannell up and walking again, and despite all he’s been through, he wants to return to the country where his life was turned upside-down.

Pannell won’t return as a soldier; he’s been medically retired. And he’s too pragmatic to think he could even the score with the insurgents whose grenades shattered his body.

"It's so hard to get those guys. They skip over two streets, change their shirts, and they're not who they were," he said. "Unless you've been studying this guy on the 'black list,' you're not going to recognize him on the street."

It's a sense of duty to the deployed men and women that is nagging at him to go back. He said he wants them to know that just because a servicemember is injured doesn't mean he forgets about his buddies who are still patrolling the streets of Iraq.

"I think it would be vitally important for those dudes to realize that once we get hurt, we don't forget about them," Pannell said. "That's something a lot of people can't understand, but it's impossible. It's impossible to forget your guys."

Pannell said he thinks the members of his unit who didn't get hurt had it much worse than he did. It's not that he would ever wish on his buddies what he's been through, but once he began to recover, he said, he could get on with his life.

"Once I got hit, I was safe. I was back in the States, (and) the war was over for me," he said. "They (were) going out those gates every day, not knowing if they're going to come back or not. That's a hell of a thing to bear, you know?"

While his wife, Danielle, supports his desire to go back, she has a slightly different take on why he wants to make the trip.

"He went into Iraq a scared little kid and came out the same way because he never really got to say goodbye, never got to have closure (in that part) of his life. When he left, he was unconscious," she said in a previous American Forces Press Service interview. "He wants to go back and say, 'Look, I'm here. You didn't defeat me.'"

Maybe he'll get his chance. "If anybody wants me to tag along on a (United Service Organizations) trip, I'm down," he said. "Drew Carey goes over like every six months; I can hop on with him."



Kevin Pannell (left) paddles a sit-on-top kayak alongside Melanie Kaplan in the waters off of Cinnamon Bay, St. John, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Oct. 10, 2007. Kaplan helped organize a trip to the islands for seven veterans who lost limbs in the Iraq and Vietnam conflicts. Pannell, who lost his right leg below the knee and his left leg above the knee while serving in Iraq, and his comrades learned to sea kayak and snorkel while on the trip. Photo by Samantha L. Quigley