

## Wounded Warriors Return to Iraq

By Army Spc. Michael J. MacLeod  
Special to American Forces Press Service

CAMP RAMADI, Iraq, Jan. 4, 2010 – Five severely wounded veterans returned to Iraq last week as part of the third installment of an evolving program to help wounded warriors heal from traumatic combat injuries.



*Army Command Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Wilson accompanies Army Sgt. 1st Class Mike Schlitz, a wounded warrior returning to Iraq as part of Operation Proper Exit, Dec. 29, 2009, at Camp Ramadi, Iraq. The program returns severely wounded veterans to the battlefield where they were wounded to help them find psychological closure. U.S. Army photo by Spc. Michael J. MacLeod*

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The group, consisting of amputees and severe-burn victims, visited deployed paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division as part of Operation Proper Exit, a program designed to return the injured to the scene of their battlefield injuries to help them find psychological closure.

Richard Kell, founder of the nonprofit Troops First Foundation that runs the program, estimates the number of wounded Iraq veterans who fit its criteria – those who are mentally and physically moving forward with a recovery plan – to be between 1,000 and 1,500.

The program now has helped 18 wounded soldiers and Marines move on with their lives, Kell said.

“Can we really make a dent? We’re going to try,” he said.

The goal is to make one trip per month following the upcoming Iraqi national elections. While Kell said he does not expect to get the majority of eligible wounded warriors to Iraq before U.S. forces leave in 2011, he’s working with Army Col. David Sutherland, a former brigade commander in Iraq’s Diyala province, and Army Command Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Wilson, the highest-ranking enlisted soldier of U.S. Forces Iraq, to consider ways to multiply the program’s reach, including ways to help families of fallen servicemembers.

“Lots of Gold Star families would like to come here to find closure as well, to see where their loved ones died,” Kell said. “We’ve considered making our alumni available to talk to those families, so that they can tell them that their sacrifices have extreme value here in Iraq.”

Operation Proper Exit officials ask one wounded warrior from each trip to act as a mentor for the next, a role Sutherland fulfilled on the first trip. Army Sgt. 1st Class Joshua Olson served as the mentor for last week’s trip. “I’m learning what that’s all about,” Kell said. “He looks after his fellow soldiers very well.”

Having an alumnus return as a military mentor with following groups is the most significant

structural change since the program began, he said. The program also has reduced the number of meetings and command briefs during the trips to allow wounded warriors maximum time with soldiers on the ground.

“That’s the most effective use of their time,” Kell said.

But the greatest change Kell has noticed from trip to trip is the identity that each group takes on.

“The first group viewed themselves as ambassadors to keep the door open for future trips,” he explained. “They made sure that when they did talk to the press, they were very honest and truthful about their experiences.

“The second group wanted to report back to families of their fallen comrades that their sacrifices were not in vain, that they had significant meaning, and that they added a great deal to the quality of life here in Iraq and potential for long-term security,” he continued. “I think they found that to be true.”

The identity for this trip would have to be called ‘Schlitz’s Trip,’” Kell said. Army Sgt. 1st Class Mike Schlitz, who Kell described as “an amazing young man,” has been burned on 85 percent of his body. Doctors harvested the remaining 15 percent for skin grafts, so Schlitz has given up 100 percent of his body’s surface, Kell said.

“His ability to reach out and want to make other people feel good is an amazing quality,” he said. “This isn’t to take anything from the other warriors, but I think we will all leave here changed.”

While one of Schlitz’s goals is to continue with small-venue public speaking, some participants prefer to avoid the media exposure during the Operation Proper Exit trips.

“We let the press be the warriors’ own decision,” Kell said. “If five out of five of our current group chose not to have their photographs taken or talk to the media, the reality is, that’s OK,” he said. “We also guarantee them that if they do agree to talk to the press and it does become a burden, we will end it.”

Kell cited an incident with a reporter who attempted to interview two wounded warriors during a visit to a war memorial at Forward Operating Base Normandy. The reporter was asked to stand down.

“Ironically, that moment of separation helped him gain greater insight into what this program is all about, and it came through in the article he wrote,” Kell said.

As the five wounded warriors told their stories one by one to more than 100 paratroopers at a “town hall” meeting at Camp Ramadi, Kell made one last point.

“We’re not going to make the soldiers make that decision before they get here,” he said. “What you see is five soldiers in here that want to tell their stories, and they’re getting encouraged to tell their stories, and they’re getting comfortable with telling their stories. I would tell you, a week ago I’m not so sure they all felt they would be sitting in there doing

this.”

(Army Spc. Michael J. MacLeod serves in U.S. Forces West with the 82nd Airborne Division’s 1st Advise and Assist Brigade.)

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*Army Capt. Sam Brown tells the story of his injury to paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division’s 1st Advise and Assist Brigade while visiting Camp Ramadi, Iraq, Dec. 29, 2009, as part of Operation Proper Exit. At left is his wife, Army Capt. Amy Brown, a dietitian with 47th Combat Support Hospital. U.S. Army photo by Spc. Michael J. MacLeod*

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*Army Capt. Amy Brown listens as her husband, Army Capt. Sam Brown, tells the story of his injury to paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division’s 1st Advise and Assist Brigade while visiting Camp Ramadi, Iraq, Dec. 29, 2009, as part of Operation Proper Exit. U.S. Army photo by Spc. Michael J. MacLeod*

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*Retired Army Sgt. Bill Congleton holds a microphone for Army Sgt. 1st Class Mike Schlitz during a town hall meeting with paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division’s 1st Advise Assist Brigade at Camp Ramadi, Iraq, Dec. 29, 2009, as part of Operation Proper Exit. U.S. Army photo by Spc. Michael J. MacLeod*

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*Richard Kell, founder of Operation Proper Exit, listens to program participants tell the stories of their injuries to more than 100 paratroopers with the 82nd Airborne Division’s 1st Advise and Assist Brigade at Camp Ramadi, Iraq, Dec. 29, 2009. U.S. Army photo by Spc. Michael J. MacLeod*

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