

## *A Wounded Warrior – With an incredible spirit!*

This flight (Killeen to Dallas) I thought was going to be quite blah and very vanilla pudding. I was wrong. It started when the plane taxied in. The plane was an ATR turbo prop. Heck I haven't flown on one of those in years. I actually thought that most of them had been mothballed. Getting on board with my "gear" was a little adventure all in itself. As I sat there thinking ahead of what I would be doing in Dallas and the airplane continued to board, I heard, "I got the window." That's when I met someone who I will have a hard time forgetting.

For the sake of this story I will call him John. John appeared alert and full of a little nervous energy. After buckling in he started to manipulate a tablet, and I asked him if that was an I Pad? That is the question that opened up an interesting and unforgettable conversation. He said, "no, it is a sony but I'm really impressed with its speed." We then talked a bit about tablets and their capability. After a bit he told me, "this is my first flight since the attack." He was a little worried about how his ears would handle the pressurization. At first that comment went right over my head (no one can accuse me of being overly perceptive and this time I wasn't). Later I had to re-visit the "attack" comment and learn more so we did.

John (in his 30's and in the warzone multiple times) had talked with his wife and optimistically said he is going to be just fine and get through his mission ok. He reminded her that he has missed land mines and two rockets flew over his head and he felt he would skate for his last 30 days there. She scolded him by saying not to be so confident and be careful. At his base he just picked up a coke. John always drinks Pepsi but they were out so it had to be coke this time. As he was walking away his buds told him not to drink that coke because it's bad luck. He laughed and joked and walked away until the rocket hit. In his word "a deliberate attack of the base," and he was right underneath it. These rockets are designed to kill anything and anyone within 100 meters. He was 30 feet from impact and lived. But it wasn't pretty.

He had extensive head injuries and had to get a re-build on much of his facial bones. He remembers as he awoke in Bagram Head Injury Unit that the doctors were amazed and talking about how his eyes escaped the shrapnel. He even remembers joking a bit with them as they were trying to re-build his head and clean it from all the shrapnel damage. Oh by the way, that coke can? He was told that it was pinned inside his hand grip, crushed and empty but held there by shrapnel.

Miraculously, his vision is just fine and the facial reconstruction was amazing. His memory, however, not so good. Since the attack he has fallen a lot and in those falls he has had over 20 concussions. He is a very intelligent guy and had known 6 computer languages. He used to write software applications just for fun. Now that is gone. Gone also is a great deal of memory. During his last trip home to Oregon, he saw an old acquaintance but could not place him until his 11 year old son mentioned that it was John's best high school friend. He is enroute to his home again. Happy homecoming this time? Unfortunately not. John has been going through one medical procedure after another since the attack. He has many more to go. He pointed to his legs and they are still full of metal shrapnel. Today he is enroute to his home in Oregon and it seems like the 15 year relationship with his wife is over. She cannot handle living

with “half” the man that she married so she had filed for a divorce. He will be going back to figure out how he can remain in his two children’s lives. John also has a 9 year old daughter.

As I heard this I didn’t say anything and really didn’t know what to say. Here is a guy that has gotten blown up for us in his service and is facing numerous medical procedures, doesn’t have a job, and now is losing his wife. Wow! A wounded warrior, a man afflicted for life, a hero yet without a job or a home. All the while maintaining an incredible upbeat attitude and spirit. With that attitude I believe it will serve him well in his recovery and also in future opportunities to serve others. This was an incredible meeting with a super individual.

After landing and taxing in, I had little words for him, but I did focus, as he does, on the future and I mentioned that he faces a lot of new beginnings. He agreed and said, “Yes, a lot of them.” I told him God has blessed him and hope that he received a complete and full recovery. I thanked him on behalf of our country and from our family for his service and wished him Godspeed. Then we parted. Somehow I don’t believe John knows how much his story can impact another. From our chance meeting it wasn’t John who was moved nearly as much as I. When I think of this sharp intelligent young family man (the age of my sons) I am greatly moved. A wounded warrior who has given so much yet remains so positive.

As I walked up the ramp I thought of a lot of things and most was sobering. This meeting had just been a happening. What a great country we live in. Why? Because there are things that we stand for that are worth fighting for and there are Johns who serve our cause. It was my honor to have met him.