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Wounded warrior turns battlefield experience into career helping others

by Tech. Sgt. Angela Shepherd
1st SOW Public Affairs

11/1/2007 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla.** -- Tech. Sgt. Christian MacKenzie will remember April 13, 2004, forever; it was a day when an attack in the skies over Iraq pushed him down a grueling road of recovery and healing. Today, countless lives have been changed because of him and what happened that day.

Sergeant MacKenzie, formerly a flight engineer with the 20th Special Operations Squadron, now works as a patient liaison in the U.S. Special Operations Command Care Coalition Office at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. In this capacity, he works with all special operators who arrive at Walter Reed after being injured on the battlefield.

"When I went through my recovery three-and-a-half years ago, I didn't really have the kind of assistance I now provide in the hospital setting. Instead, I relied on the support of my fellow PAVE LOW warriors and the Air Force Special Operations Command family after I left the hospital," he said. "Now, I get to return the favor and provide that 'family' connection during a really traumatic time in the patients' lives, and that is very important."

While the transition from injured warrior to patient liaison may seem like a natural fit, it actually took several favors and the near-death experience of another Hurlburt Airman to complete the journey.

It all started on that pivotal day in 2004, when Sergeant MacKenzie took off aboard an MH-53 PAVE LOW helicopter on what was supposed to be a routine re-supply mission to ground troops in Fallujah. From there, his crew was supposed to head to a town south of Baghdad. Before they could make it there Sergeant MacKenzie's PAVE LOW was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade. The attack left him fighting for his life, with a loss of vision, hearing, touch and smell.

After a transfer from a medical unit in Baghdad to a hospital in Germany, Sergeant MacKenzie had extremely poor vision, blood in his eyes and corneal abrasions. He was eventually moved to Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

"This is where my battles began to become real," he said. "I was trying to save my bad eye, trying to save my face. But what made the healing easier as I searched for meaning to the things that happened to me was talking about it.

"I spoke at the worldwide Life Support Conference about how the equipment I wore led to my survival. I spoke to



Tech. Sgt. Christian MacKenzie (right) and Staff Sgt. Eric Ezell pose with Miss America 2007 Lauren Nelson at the USO of Metro Washington Area Annual Awards Banquet earlier this year. Sergeant Ezell was the Air Force honoree during the event because of wounds he received in Iraq. Sergeant MacKenzie attended as his special guest because of the support he provided Sergeant Ezell during his recovery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D. C. (Courtesy photo)

future wing and group commanders about the events that took place during the days after my shoot down and the things commanders need to do to take care of their wounded warriors," he said, adding that he found it very rewarding to help anyone he could.

As Sergeant MacKenzie's recovery progressed, he took on another battle - the battle to get back on flying status. Sixteen months after the attack in Iraq, he won this fight and was selected for a tour as a flight attendant aboard Air Force Two. A few months after starting his new job at Andrews AFB, Md., he received a call from the former commander of the 20th SOS, Lt. Col. Scott Howell.

"Colonel Howell had been personally involved with me getting back into flying, so we had a strong working relationship," Sergeant MacKenzie said. "When Staff Sgt. Eric Ezell was enroute to Walter Reed after being shot in Iraq, the colonel called me to see what I could do to help him out."

As Sergeant Ezell's former supervisor and fellow "crew dog" at the 20th SOS, stepping in was an automatic response for Sergeant MacKenzie.

"I met Eric as he arrived at the hospital and stayed at his side the whole night," he said. "I had been through this and thought that if there was anything I could do to help, it would be just being there for him."

Seeing the impact of his immediate response, the Air Force Casualty Affairs office asked Sergeant MacKenzie to serve as Sergeant Ezell's family liaison officer. He happily obliged after deconflicting it with his flight attendant job. As he continued serving as the FLO over the next three months, the USSOCOM Liaison Office at Walter Reed also took notice of his impact.

"When they asked me to be a liaison full time, I felt completely honored, but torn at the same time," Sergeant MacKenzie said. "I was only one year into a three-year controlled tour as a flight attendant."

To help him navigate that obstacle, the USSOCOM Liaison Office ran the idea up their chain of command until it eventually reached Lt. Gen. Michael Wooley, AFSOC commander. After making sure Sergeant MacKenzie was willing to give up the flying job he fought so hard to get, General Wooley knocked the barrier out of the way. Sergeant MacKenzie was reassigned full time back to AFSOC, working to serve the special operations community's wounded.

Now Sergeant MacKenzie spends his days assisting wounded warriors and their families with every aspect of the recovery process. Most importantly, he helps them get back to where they want to be.

"I know what it is like to be in that bed, and I know how amazing it is to have someone there for you that is totally focused on you getting better," he said. "My complete dedication is what I try to give back to everyone who has to endure the tragedies of war, and it's an honor to do that."

Sergeant MacKenzie says his experiences over the last three years have changed his life for the better. He now realizes how precious life really is, and his new job has made him appreciate the strength of human character.

"I have learned that it is not about what happened to you, but rather about what you can do now that you are where you are," he said. "Watching these men overcome events like these really makes you proud to be a part of special operations."

"If people had the opportunity to see these guys overcome adversity on a daily basis, they would truly be affected. When people just stop by and say hi once, all they see is the person in the bed and the injury. When you see them every day, you get to see the true hero and the person they are."