



Company Command

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company-Level Leaders

From: 1LT Jason Mazzella, a wounded warrior

A Wounded Lieutenant's Journey

I thought I'd say a few words here about what it's like to be wounded in country and evacuated to the States. I think that it's something a good leader needs to know

about and understand because this is a time in your medevaced soldiers' lives when they truly need you.

—J.M.

A little background information. I was a Fire Support Officer with A/2-12 Infantry in the Pech River Valley of Kunar Province, Afghanistan. I was wounded in the Chapa Dara District Center while my guys were setting up an 81 mm mortar tube. It was February 20, 2010, and we were trying to prevent the District Center from being overrun by insurgents coming out of the Korengal Valley. If taken over, the District Center would provide a staging point for AAF operations throughout the entire Pech Valley. The week before, I had coordinated fire missions out there for hours, and we had confirmed multiple enemy KIA with the TOW missiles and CROWS. On this visit we were back to do the same, and we had been there only 10 minutes when a 107 mm rocket impacted within 15 feet of my platoon sergeant and me. My PSG, SSG Michael Cardenaz, was killed by the blast, and I was medevaced to Jalalabad and eventually to Walter Reed [Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C.]. If this is too gruesome, I apologize, but I think that those of you reading this will see it as an opportunity to understand what the entire process is like. I pray that none of you is ever in my situation.

When I was first hit, I had no idea what had happened. I've been diagnosed with mild TBI. The only thing I remember is that I was talking to SSG Cardenaz, and the next instant there was dirt flying through the air. I had blood running down my face, my Oakleys were peppered with shrapnel and I couldn't see out of them. My mind was telling me to get to the MRAP for cover. I took three steps before I realized that my right leg was bending strangely below my knee. I went to the ground and took off my eye protection to see better. I saw SSG Cardenaz lying on his stomach next to the mortar tube, and I immediately got on

my MBITR. I had an FO on the ANP OP above us, and he was on the radio asking me for a status. I told him that we had two urgent-surgical casualties and to coordinate with the Kiowas for a 9-line medevac request. At the same time, between breaths, I began yelling for the medics to help SSG Cardenaz. I continued talking to my FO as one of the medics assessed me. Eventually I had to tell my FO that I was one of the urgent-surgical casualties and that the medics were taking my radio away from me. After he got back from the deployment, my FO told me that he had no idea that I was wounded, let alone urgent-surgical. I don't



1LT Jason Mazzella and his wife, Brianna, enjoy an outing from Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C., a few months into his recovery from a rocket attack in Afghanistan in 2010.

A Company Command Glossary of Terms

AAF—Anti-Afghan forces.
ACH—Advanced combat helmet.
ALOC—Administrative and logistics operations center.
ANA—Afghan national army.
ANP—Afghan national police.
CROWS—Common remotely operated (.50-caliber machine-gun) weapon station.
ETT—Embedded training team.
FO—Forward observer.
HHC—Headquarters and headquarters company.
KIA—Killed in action.
MBITR—Handheld radio.

MRAP—Mine resistant, ambush protected combat vehicle.
Oakleys—Protective eyeglasses.
OP—Observation post.
PKM—Machine gun.
PSG—Platoon sergeant.
RPG—Rocket-propelled grenade.
SAPI—Small arms protective insert.
TBI—Traumatic brain injury.
TOW—Tube-launched, optically sighted, wire-guided missile system.
WTB—Warrior Transition Battalion.
XO—Executive officer.

know if it was my training or the shock, but I felt strangely calm. The medic moved me to cover and further assessed me. I was separated from SSG Cardenaz from this point until the medevac birds arrived.

Here's my first lesson for everyone—certify as many Soldiers as possible as combat lifesavers. From the moment I

was wounded, I never looked at my leg. I knew that if I looked at it there was a chance I might go into shock, depending on what it looked like. I think this helped me keep my mind clear. My medic was hesitant to tighten a tourniquet on my leg, even though I had an open fracture and my leg was pretty much hanging on by the skin. She gave me

some gauze to hold to my face and applied two bandages and a pressure bandage to my leg before she left me to help the other casualties. I was left with one of the squad leaders, who stayed with me until I was medevaced. This was the most important thing that anyone could have done for me because he kept talking to me and kept my mind off my injuries. He kept me calm when everyone around me opened fire on enemy positions. I had him tighten the tourniquet on my leg when I bled through all the bandages. It shouldn't be the wounded Soldier's job to care for himself when there aren't medics around. Have your guys trained and ready to do it in an instant, including inserting IVs. An IV wasn't started for me until I got on the medevac bird more than two hours after I was wounded. (My ACH and SAPI plates saved my life. My ACH took a chunk of shrapnel to my Rhino mount, and it imbedded in the Kevlar. Also, when I woke up in Bagram, I had a pretty big bruise on my chest from



1LT Mazzella rests in the hospital at Bagram Airfield on February 21, 2010, the day after he was wounded. He was admitted to Walter Reed, where he underwent nine surgeries in six months from the day of the rocket attack.



**SSG Michael David Cardenaz,
31 March 1980–20 February 2010**

I couldn't have asked for a better NCO than SSG Michael Cardenaz. Time and again in his career, he demonstrated that he would go "above and beyond" to support his fellow Soldiers. During his Iraq deployment, he was awarded the Soldier's Medal for repeatedly placing his own life in danger to try to save his Soldiers who were trapped in an overturned vehicle. During our Afghanistan deployment, he was awarded an Army Commendation Medal for Valor for employing machine-gun and mortar fires, in the face of heavy enemy fire, to rescue his fellow Soldiers during a firefight. Not only was SSG Cardenaz a great Soldier, but he was also a loving father and husband. He continues to be sorely missed by those who had the privilege to know him.

—J.M.

shrapnel that my plates stopped. I was wearing a plate carrier with no side plates, and I was lucky that everything was stopped from hitting my vitals.)

I think I began to go into shock because I only remember sporadic moments until the medevac bird arrived. I overheard one of the flight medics on the ground say that they'd bring me up first and then the "hero" second. That was when I first realized SSG Cardenaz had died. I was brought up in a hoist and actually got stuck underneath the Black Hawk when the flight medic dropped the guide line. I had to reach up with my good hand and grab him so that he could pull me in. The entire time I was looking out at the nearest mountain, waiting for an RPG to take down the bird or for a PKM to open up on me. Inside the Black Hawk, the flight medic stuck me five times to get an IV going because my veins were pretty bad at that point. SSG Cardenaz was then brought up and placed next to me. I passed out for the 45-minute flight to Jalalabad and woke up when the helicopter landed.

I was rushed into the hospital and immediately had doctors and nurses everywhere around me. It was comforting when they brought in the other wounded guys and I got to see them. The doctors told me that they would put me under for surgery there and for the trip to Bagram. They asked if there was anything they could do for me, and the first thing that came to my mind was my wife. She had just flown from Colorado Springs [Colo.] to New York to see our family. Someone pulled out a cell phone and asked me for her number. I gave it to them, and they called her. My first words to her were, "Hi, babe. Please don't be mad at me, but I broke my leg." Obviously, she had no clue what I was talking about, so I said, "Here, talk to the surgeon" and gave him the phone. He explained to her what had happened and that I was going to be fine. It was great for her to hear my voice and to know that I was OK. The surgeon continued to call her throughout the whole process until I got to Walter Reed. I wish I knew who he was because I

would thank him. The information my wife had was 12 to 18 hours ahead of and more accurate than what Rear Detachment had. She probably would've lost her mind if the only information she had was from Rear D.

At home, my entire town pulled together and helped take care of my family. My house was full of friends and family hoping to help, and people brought food to my parents for weeks. The support on the home front has been tremendous.

I woke up in Bagram to a nurse telling me that I was lucky to be alive. He gave me a jar with shrapnel that they had pulled out of my head. The largest piece was about an inch long and had gone through my nose—through my nasal cavity—and stopped in the tissue right before my brain stem. He said a little farther, and I would've died instantly. I only spent one day in Bagram, but the greatest thing that happened was getting visitors. One of my Soldiers who had just gotten back from leave and a bunch of guys from our ALOC came and visited me. It was nice to have people come and see how I was doing, and it helped to see familiar faces.

I spent a miserable flight to Germany on a stretcher on the top rack of a C-130. The flight nurse told me that I was one of the best patients he'd ever had, despite my serious injuries. All I did was try to sleep and not pee on the people below me when I went into the container they gave me.

When I arrived in Germany, I was placed in a bed next to a Marine ETT sergeant who had been wounded with me. He was the only other one medevaced out to Germany, and it was awesome to be in a bed next to him. He had his computer with him, and we Skyped with his wife and kids. It really helped pass the time and helped comfort me. I was flown to Walter Reed that night with him.

The flight from Germany to the States was even more miserable than the one from Afghanistan to Germany.

When we got to the United States, we were split up; he was sent to Bethesda Naval Hospital [Bethesda, Md.], and

I went to Walter Reed. My wife and family had driven down that night, so they were there waiting for me. The first time my wife saw me was when they were changing the bandages on my leg. It was probably not the best time for her to see me because the softball-size hole in my leg was out in the open. I went through a bunch of surgeries as an inpatient at Walter Reed, and my experiences there were great. Everyone was very friendly and accommodating. However, what meant the most to me was the email traffic that I got from my unit. My wife and I received emails from my company commander, first sergeant, previous battalion commander, and some of my Soldiers and friends. My wife read the emails out loud to me and even printed them so that we could keep them. I spent three months at Walter Reed before the doctors would send me back to Fort Carson [Colo.]. I really needed to be back at my house in my own environment. After the first month at Walter Reed, I felt abandoned. I had stopped getting information from my guys who were deployed, and I felt lonely and on my own. They were finishing up their deployment and had more

than enough on their plates. Thankfully, a few of my friends who were on leave from Afghanistan came to visit me. It was strange having them push me around in a wheelchair, but I loved having them there. I felt like I had abandoned them since I was in the States for the last three months of our unit's deployment. At the same time, I was also dealing with some personal issues and survivor's guilt since I had been standing right next to SSG Cardenaz and talking to him when he was killed. Why did I survive?

I got back to Fort Carson in a wheelchair and was greeted at the airport by friends and 10 people from the WTB and my unit's Rear D. It meant a lot to have people waiting for me with signs welcoming me back. I continued therapy and treatment back at Carson. It hurt that we were still losing guys while I was here. I felt helpless. I wanted to do something to help them, but I couldn't. My unit came home three months after I was wounded. I attended as many of the welcome-back ceremonies as I could, and it was awesome to see them come back. It was great seeing my Soldiers' faces as I tapped them on the shoulder and they recognized who I was. I just wish I could have been involved in the ceremonies somehow. It would've been nice to walk in on crutches with my guys when they entered the building.

At this same time, I was dealing with the effects of my TBI. I was a different person, and my wife noticed it and brought it up with the doctors. They referred me to the TBI clinic on Fort Carson, and within minutes I was diagnosed and prescribed medicine to help "fix me." A year later, I'm finally getting back to where I should be.

Having my Soldiers home was a huge weight off my shoulders. I was able to hang out with my friends and relax more. It meant a lot, having these guys come and visit me and do barbecues at my house. I was able to find out how the rest of the deployment went and hear some of their stories about what I missed.

I found out that my wife was pregnant a few weeks before we went back to Walter Reed for more surgeries. I then realized why I survived, and it has helped me deal with the guilt. Although on the outside it appeared that I was fine, on the inside I was hurting. Fatherhood immediately started pulling me out of my slump and motivated me to follow up on my goal to return to duty. After finishing all of my surgeries at Walter Reed (nine surgeries in six months from the day I was wounded), I had a newly reconstructed nose, and the external frame had been removed from my leg. I could finally wear pants instead of shorts and could escape from the constant stares and questions about what happened. Some people don't understand that a guy with a ton of scars and a big metal frame on his leg doesn't want to talk to every stranger he comes across. It got old real fast. It



1LT Mazzella's protective equipment saved his life and his eyesight when an enemy rocket landed within 15 feet of him during a combat operation in Afghanistan. This photo was taken a few days before he was wounded.



1LT Mazzella, with Brianna and their son, Dillon, credits fatherhood with pulling him out of a slump and motivating him to pursue his goal to return to active duty.

wasn't that I didn't like talking about it; I have no problem sharing my story (as you can tell), but at the same time I was trying to move on with my life and situation. Each time someone asked about it, I felt like I had to start over.

Now I've reached the point, a year later, where I want to use my story to help other wounded Soldiers. From the day I was hurt, I shared my story with the media and military and civilian VIPs. I've met the President and the First Lady, the Secretary of Defense, and more generals than I can remember. The visits that I do remember are the ones where I was given an opportunity to help other wounded Soldiers. I've been working with the Wounded Warrior Project to increase its involvement at Fort Carson. I spoke at the Air Force Academy on a wounded-warrior panel to help them understand leadership and overcoming adversity. I'm sharing this here to help you all understand what it feels like to be your Soldier who is medevaced after being wounded. I'm still a Warrior in Transition [WT] in the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Carson. Since November, I've been its HHC XO. I've learned a lot about the cadre side to everything, and I've helped bring my experiences in as a WT.

My final note is that out of everything that's happened to me, the thing that hurt the most was finally receiving my personal items from Afghanistan. The packing list for the box didn't list all of my belongings, and the stuff not listed there has never been returned to me. I have no idea who took it all, but it must have been fellow Soldiers. That hurts. The stuff

that did arrive was opened somewhere along the route. The stolen items include a video camera and my iPod. I never got back two irreplaceable items—my wedding ring and a cross that had been given to me before the deployment (and that had been carried in every war since World War I). I hate to end on a bad note like this, but as leaders we all need to understand that this kind of crap happens, and we need to prevent it. I'm not the only one it's happened to.

Please remember that when a Soldier is medevaced, he is at a critical time in his life when he needs his fellow Soldiers and leaders the most. No one back here understands what he's been through. Keep him updated on all the little things going on over there, and incorporate him into things when you redeploy. He's still a part of your family, even though he's not there. I hope this has provided some insight into what your wounded warriors may be experiencing.

By sharing his experience so candidly, Jason enables us to gain vicarious experience about what it's like for our Soldiers who have been wounded and medevaced. If you are a currently commissioned past, present or future company commander, we invite you to log onto <http://CC.army.mil> and join the professional conversation that makes us all more effective leaders.