



# WOUNDED WARRIOR TURNED CAVER ON CONSERVATION LANDS

## Wounded Warrior joins Fort Stanton Cave Study Project

by Lynda A. Sánchez (Also by Lynda A. Sánchez for the Ruidoso Free Press, Aug.16, 2013)



Photo courtesy of Steve Peerman

Imagine a dark place hundreds of feet below the surface of the earth. Imagine using your hands and feet to feel your way, using your fingers and toes to help guide you in a narrow crevice or in a tight place you can barely squeeze through. Then imagine you only have your fingers and arms to help you find your way. You are an Iraqi War Veteran, who has found a challenge on this earth unlike any other and you are mastering maneuvering through this dark, damp, yet magnificent site, all the while without the use of your own legs. You are... Matt Zajac, Iraqi War Veteran, rock climber, scuba and skydiver, student and now caver.

Matt is a young man with things to do and the guts to try anything that most of us would never consider. His desire for bold action and extraordinary challenge comes from a life full of adventure with one major setback. During his time in Iraq he was severely wounded when an improvised explosive device took both of his legs, but never his spirit.

Joining the Army after he graduated from Alamogordo High School in 2005 he was on a tour of duty in Baghdad when his vehicle was hit by one of those bombs that have maimed and killed so many. At the time he was leading a night raid and if he had not swerved his Humvee hard to the right, his entire crew could have been taken out. Not only was he left temporarily blind, with severe burns on his back and legs, but shrapnel was found in his face and a jagged hole ran through his right wrist. In addition to these wounds, his left leg at his calf was blown away as was his right leg just below the hip.

Those who do not know war can only guess at the pain and the difficulty of a comeback, yet 25 surgeries later by our miracle caregivers at the Brooks military hospital and other facilities that housed him, Zajac is now enrolled at NMSU and studying Mechanical Engineering. He is truly a miracle and an inspiration to many of his fellow veterans and future friends.

Matt is also a spokesman for the famed Fisher House that has assisted family and veterans who have become wounded warriors. The organization helped both Matt and Matt's dad during the very rough beginnings of this long journey to recovery with housing and back up care.

It was his girlfriend, Karla Wheeler, who introduced him to caving. Steve Peerman, project director for the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project, [Fort Stanton Cave Study Project](#) invited both Karla and Matt to participate in the Project's research expedition, a long term project to map and survey the Snowy River cave.

Peerman noted, "I am amazed by Matt's ability, not only to participate in caving, but also to be a valuable and contributing member of a research team. He does not make excuses for his disability and does whatever it takes to get the job done. It may take him a little longer than the rest of us, but his spirit and determination should be a lesson for us all."

Wheeler explained that sometimes because of an accumulation of sweat, Matt's liners lose suction and the legs will slide off. On one pull-up in a rough area with many loose rocks he lost his left leg. However, he was able to lower himself to a nearby rock and safely re-attach his leg.

Matt is an amazing young man and an inspiration to those who have met him. He is especially so to the cavers who themselves have overcome difficult circumstances and obstacles to explore, map and survey places like Fort Stanton Cave and notably the famed Snowy River Passage that is now more than 12 miles long. All of this research is done to help preserve an incredible natural resource located on the BLM Fort Stanton NCA (National Conservation Area) which is part of the National Conservation Lands.

The National Conservation Lands comprise 28 million acres of the most ecologically rich and culturally significant of lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. They are our nation's newest collection of protected public lands—standing in stature with our National Parks, National Forests and National Wildlife Refuges.