

Soldier with prosthetic legs explores Fort Stanton Cave

Strength: Soldier with prosthetic legs explores Fort Stanton Cave

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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.

That is the challenge faced by Matt Zajac, Iraqi War veteran, rock climber, scuba and skydiver, student and now caver.

Zajac 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 the bombs that have maimed and killed so many. At the time he, was leading a night raid and if he had not swerved his military vehicle 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 caregivers at the Brooks military hospital and other facilities that housed him, Zajac is now enrolled at New Mexico State University and studying mechanical engineering.

Zajac also is a spokesman for the famed Fisher House that has assisted family and veterans, who are wounded warriors.

The organization helped both Zajac and his father during the very rough beginnings of this long journey to recovery with housing and back-up care.

Off campus, he has a special girlfriend, Karla Wheeler, who introduced him to caving. She majored in general biology with an emphasis on botany, but she now might focus on a medical career or the study of genetics.

She said she really enjoys outdoor activities as evidenced by her adventuresome spirit.

Matt and Karla are both members of the Mesilla Valley Grotto, a caving organization in southern New Mexico.

Steve Peerman, project director for the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project, also is a member. He invited both Karla and Matt to Lincoln County to participate in the three Fort Stanton Cave Study Project expeditions.

The cave research is a long-term, on-going project to map and survey the world-class cave complex in Lincoln County.

"I am amazed by Matt's ability, not only to participate in the sport of caving, but also to be a valuable and contributing member of a caving team," Peerman said. "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.

When he is not off caving or studying, Matt enjoys driving his jeep in the back country or working on his 1973 Dodge Charger.

Zajac is an inspiration 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 Bureau of Land Management Fort Stanton National Conservation Area.

Zajac also acknowledges that the enemy attack meant to destroy was surely a life changing event. "It is what it is," he often says with his special grin that embraces everyone around him.

And his biggest accomplishment when asked? "Surviving. Just being able to live life is what means the most to me."

