

‘Thank God I Was Blown Up’

After he was nearly killed in Afghanistan, Justin Lane returned to the country earlier this year and was determined to leave the war zone this time on his own terms

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Two moments stand out for former Army Spc. Justin Lane when he recalls his deployment to Afghanistan — one he’ll never forget and one he’ll never remember.

Always happy-go-lucky with an air of optimism, Lane’s attitude became jaded and vengeful when on March 26, 2011, his brother in arms, and friend from his hometown, Army Cpl. Justin Ross, was killed in Afghanistan. Less than four months later, on July 2, 2011, Spc. Lane was in a vehicle that hit an improvised explosive device (IED). It nearly ended his life.

Lane vowed to return one day and leave Afghanistan on his terms. In April, he got that opportunity. Another wounded combat veteran introduced Lane to an organization called Feherty’s Troops First Foundation. The Laurel, Md.-based nonprofit supports “wellness, quality-of-life and event-based initiatives” for troops wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to its website.

Through its program, Operation Proper Exit, Troops First gives wounded veterans the opportunity to return to Afghanistan or Iraq and leave with “peace of mind and closure.” More than 100 service members have taken part in the program since it launched in June 2009.

“There were a lot of feelings inside when I found out I was going back to Afghanistan,” Lane began to explain, then hesitated, remembering the journey that brought him to this moment.

‘THE MOST DANGEROUS JOB’

Like many soldiers from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Lane was heavily influenced by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack.

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“I remember my eighth-grade teacher brought in a TV, and we didn’t know what was going on,” Lane said. “We watched the towers fall, and I knew at that moment that I was going to join the military.”

His plan to join the military was put on hold after high school graduation. Instead, he followed his high school sweetheart to Mexico, but the feeling to serve remained.

“[My brother and I] decided that we would both sign up together the following morning, but when my brother woke up, he had changed his mind,” Lane said with a chuckle. “I said, ‘Fine, but I’m going.’ My brother was the reminder I needed.”

Still living in Mexico, Lane joined the Army Reserve.

“I told the recruiter that I wanted the most dangerous job at the time so that I could serve in the best possible way,” he said. “The recruiter told me I’d be a 12B, combat engineer, doing route clearance, looking for IEDs.”

With his home of record in Green Bay, Wis., Lane was assigned to the 428th Engineer Company out of Wausau, Wis.

In August 2010, the 428th Engineer Company mobilized and shortly after deployed to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Wilson, later renamed FOB Pasab, in Zhari District, Kandahar Province west of Kandahar City in Afghanistan. This area was the birthplace of the Taliban in the 1990s.

The Sangesar, a local landmark, is located in the heart of Zhari District and named after an abandoned British stone fort from the 1800s. It also is the infamous location where Mullah Mohammed Omar first armed 50 of his students, or Taliban, and fought local warlords.

Their cause grew, and before the end of 1994, Omar’s Taliban controlled most of the country. Lane’s route clearance patrols would go by these locations almost daily, and they still hosted a heavy Taliban presence.

QUIET AREA MEANS TROUBLE

The route Lane and his fellow soldiers took on the morning of July 2, 2011, was one they frequently traveled. It also is one of the same routes referenced in *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* by Lester W. Grau, discussing Soviet combat tactics in Afghanistan.

Leaving one of the only paved roads in the country, Highway 1, one side of the road consisted of farmland and plantations. On the other side, a large mud wall lined the road with mud huts beyond it. On the far eastern boundary, the Arghandab River flowed, creating the border of Zhari Province.

Irrigation wadis snaked their way from this river and its tributaries to the farmland dominated by opium poppies and cannabis. In between was a school, long since abandoned. Grape huts, some more than 50 feet tall, dotted the landscape with a small mountain range beyond. The temperature was sweltering, even in the early morning hours, as they departed. That day's mission was different.

The 428th Engineer Company would be clearing the route of IEDs not once, as usual, but twice, in support of a 3rd Bde., 10th Mtn. Div. operation to rid the battlefield of IED emplacements. Just as the patrol approached a designated danger area, one of the vehicles was engulfed in earth. An IED exploded beneath them. Moments passed before the rest of the patrol could conduct their assessment.

Everyone was all right with no serious injuries. They would CASEVAC (emergency casualty evacuation) back to base, deliver the wounded to medics, swap vehicles and continue the mission. Lane, who had been the gunner for one of the vehicles, now became the driver.

As he drove the RG-31, specifically designed as a mine-protected vehicle with its V-shaped hull, Lane remembered that the route was quiet that day. Afghans generally loved to watch as they drove through, but today he didn't see any watching from the fields. Approaching the crater of the IED blast from only hours earlier, they were extra alert as they methodically searched for IEDs.

ALIVE THANKS TO QUICK ACTION

In an instant, Lane's vehicle was flipped in the air, ripped to pieces, and the cab penetrated with shrapnel. Lane remembers trying not to smash his squad leader, Staff Sgt. Daniel Kienow, then turning to find their gunner, Spc. Aaron Krueger, unresponsive. Moments later, Krueger snapped back to reality. Then, Lane looked down to check himself. Blood was everywhere; his body was snapped in half. Everything went blank.

"Waking up in Walter Reed was the next thing I remember," Lane said. "My whole family surrounded me."

Both legs required amputation, along with one of his fingers. His pelvis was shattered, femur broken, arm snapped, and front four teeth knocked out. Virtually all his internal organs had damage, and shrapnel destroyed his torso.

Lane suffered immense brain trauma and required a tracheotomy. It took multiple blood transfusions, more than 20 medications and the miracles of modern medicine to stabilize him.

Lane credits the expert battlefield first aid of the 428th Eng. Co.'s combat medic Jared Warren, the life-stabilizing expertise of the MEDEVAC crew and the skilled surgeons and medical professionals at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany for saving his life.

“When I finally came back to reality and saw myself, I saw a monster,” Lane said. “I thought that I didn’t have a future in this world. They told me I wouldn’t be able to walk again and that I’d have trouble talking for the rest of my life. I pushed everyone out and went into a hole.”

MUSIC AS INSPIRATION

Little by little, he made progress, but the depression remained. Lane was searching for a purpose to live. Support poured in not only from family, friends and fellow soldiers, but also from The Purple Heart Foundation, local VFW Posts and other veterans organizations. Still, he continued to fall into the figurative abyss.

Surgeries followed by therapy were his life in those initial days. To cope, Lane turned to music. Once his strength began to return, he was fitted with his first prosthetic leg. He craved the taste of freedom that it provided, but then instantly returned to disappointment when his left femur broke inside his new prosthetic. It was then he had a vision of returning to normalcy.

“I’m going to do this now, press on and I’m going to give it all to God,” Lane remembered promising himself. “And one day I heard God answer in a song.”

After several months of therapy, he was doing laps with his new prosthetics and received approval to get a driver’s license.

“That gave me freedom, and when I got that I found happiness and hope,” Lane said. “I vowed to get strong enough and healthy enough to pursue a music career.”

Six months after he nearly died in the IED blast, Lane found himself singing at the presidential inauguration for Barack Obama, and four years later, he returned for President Donald Trump’s inauguration. In between, he had the opportunity to sing with country music stars Lee Greenwood, Neal McCoy, Aaron Tippin, the Gatlin Brothers and other artists around the United States.

Touring began with his first band aptly named JP Lane and the A-Team, and continued with his current band Company 6. After hearing that he’d have trouble talking for the rest of his life, and singing would be nearly impossible, Lane defied the odds and made it his career. But advocacy remains his passion.

“God gave me music, not just for therapy, but as a career to help inspire others,” Lane said. “I met with the victims from the Boston Marathon bombing and those who had their lives destroyed by hurricanes. I always try to inspire them and show them the positivity.”

‘NICE TRY TALIBAN’

Lane also has shown a knack for business and fundraising. His motto — “Nice Try Taliban”

— is now his trademark. He owns a line of clothing that depicts the saying and has since expanded to “Nice Try Harvey” and “Nice Try Irma” to raise funds for recent hurricane relief efforts.

Living in his new house outside of San Antonio, Texas, built by Helping a Hero — a Houston-based nonprofit that serves severely disabled veterans — Lane is now on no medications and able to bench press 315 pounds during his daily exercise routine. While his recovery defied all odds, one regret lingered for Lane.

“I didn’t get to finish my mission, and I wanted to walk out of that country on my own two feet,” Lane said. “People say I conquered everything, but to me, this is the last step. Knowing that I overcame that, I know I can do anything.”

On April 1, that wish came true. Lane touched down in Afghanistan, set on overcoming that last obstacle.

“We toured all over Afghanistan, and I noticed how much it changed,” he said. “The Afghans are taking over their country, and I love to see that. That’s exactly what we were trying to [help them] do.”

Lane said that the groups involved in his trip — Operation Proper Exit, Troops First, and the military — were all “on point” and “everything was coordinated perfectly.”

He also sang for the troops and was able to “show them how we [the wounded] are still living life” regardless of their circumstances.

“Putting on a uniform again was awesome, and they made me an honorary command sergeant major while we were there,” Lane said. “But, sitting in an RG-31 again was incredible. I felt empowered, like nothing could stop me. And this time I left on my own two legs.”

The Afghanistan War vet added that the trip gave him a new perspective on his service.

“Looking back, I thank God I was blown up because I had such a negative mindset, filled with so much hate and revenge,” Lane said. “And I’m not sure I would have been able to get out of that. Now I want to help inspire others to do the same.”

Enjoying life with his new bride, Crystal, honorary Command Sgt. Maj. Justin Lane will no doubt keep singing and keep inspiring.

This article is featured in the August 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Jim

Servi. Jim Servi is a member of VFW Post 10203 in Hamburg, Wis. A veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Servi also authored the novel Forever Changed. Photo courtesy of Justin Lane. [Listen to the article.](#)