

VFW Members Urge Others to ‘Rise Above’

Two VFW members who lost limbs while serving overseas are now sharing their stories as motivational speakers

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Every time a “catastrophically wounded” veteran takes the stage, a standing ovation ensues. When the vet finishes speaking, a standing ovation ensues yet again. But to the founder of Tiger Team 7, that’s no surprise.

“America loves our troops,” said Paul McKellips, who launched the motivational speaking group earlier this year.

McKellips, the chief communications officer and Tiger Team 7 trainer, works under the Independence Fund, an organization that assists wounded vets and their families. He said that, over the years, the Independence Fund has worked with a variety of “well-spoken, articulate, combat-wounded vets” who had an interest in public speaking. Last fall, McKellips created his team, which includes two VFW members — Jack Zimmerman and Alex Jauregui.

Zimmerman, who served as an infantryman with the 101st Abn. Div. in Afghanistan from June 6, 2010, until March 9, 2011, remembers the moment his life changed. He was on a routine sweep, as his unit came upon a village they had never been through before. Shortly after witnessing two men running out of town, a gun fight ensued.

“Helicopters came in and made really light work of that day,” said Zimmerman, a member of VFW Post 1803 in Le Center, Minn.

But as they prepared to return to base, Zimmerman asked his team leader, Sgt. Miles Hurley, if they would get hit again. Before Hurley could respond, the infantryman said he felt heat “crawl” up his back. His team’s vehicle had hit an improvised explosive device (IED).

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

As soon as Zimmerman landed back on the ground, he couldn't reach for his first-aid kit on his left side, so he knew he had lost that arm. When he tried to reach with his right arm, he said, it was "just hanging on from a small piece of skin." His fellow soldiers started applying tourniquets while being ambushed.

"I sat up to see how bad a shape that I was in, and I realized my legs had been blown off," Zimmerman said.

In that moment, he thought he was going to die. Zimmerman spent six days in an induced coma, lost both legs above the knee and his left arm, and he has little function in his right hand. He spent six weeks in the hospital, one-and-a-half years rehabilitating at the Brooke Army Medical Center and underwent 20 surgeries.

"I couldn't even imagine going through something so catastrophic and not having a family to lean on like you do in the military," Zimmerman said.

'Unsure of Future'

Jauregui, a life member of VFW Post 2441 in Colusa, Calif., had his own encounter with an IED.

He completed two deployments to Iraq (June 2004-05 in Baghdad and September 2006-December 2007 in Ramadi) and deployed twice to Afghanistan (Sept. 2009-Sept. 2012 and February-April 2012), all with Bravo Co., 2nd Bn., 508th Parachute Inf. Regt., 2nd Bde. Combat Team, 82nd Abn. Div. as an infantryman. He was wounded April 8, 2012.

Two days after locating a weapons cache in Sangar in the Zhari district of Afghanistan, Jauregui returned to the town. The first squad on patrol found an IED in the same area as the cache, prompting a call to explosive ordnance disposal (EOD). Jauregui and four other soldiers escorted EOD to the site.

While on site, Jauregui found a second IED, his team leader found a third and Jauregui stepped on a fourth. Jauregui said he "instantly" knew he was hit, having been in the "very near vicinity" of other IED blasts. After he regained consciousness, Jauregui said, a fellow soldier was holding him down and kept telling him he would be OK. "He told me I'd be losing both legs," Jauregui said. "Immediately after that, [there was] just really a feeling of [being] unsure of what my future's going to look like."

His recovery process from the time he was hit to being medically retired was two years. Jauregui said he had to learn to walk again, but he was surrounded by inspiration at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. He constantly saw others with "worse" wounds "walking just fine."

Jauregui received a track chair from the Independence Fund, and the organization paid for

his parachute and equipment after he earned his skydiving certificate. After that, he said, the Independence Fund reached out about joining Tiger Team 7.

“I think it’s an important mission because I’m now six years out post-injury and I’ve experienced the PTSD, the depression, and so I think we have a message to deliver that says, ‘I know the military is exhausting and when you get out you just want a break, but that’s the worst thing you can do,’” Jauregui said.

Jauregui, who said he was diagnosed with depression and started “going down the wrong path,” has kept busy as a commercial beekeeper in California. When he gives presentations, he said, he shares his personal experiences in the military and aspects of that life that civilians might not be able to relate to. For example, going three months without a shower, being a leader in a life-or-death situation or the effect that losing a soldier has on a person.

“Being able to show civilians those life experiences and those emotional hardships that we go through as service members, I think that’s important,” Jauregui said.

Sharing Stories Helps Recovery

Unlike Jauregui, Zimmerman had been a motivational speaker prior to his involvement with Tiger Team 7. He first connected with the Independence Fund after reaching out to the group for assistance in obtaining a track chair. When Tiger Team 7 was announced, he expressed interest.

“I felt that they best understood what guys like me needed, and [I] wanted to surround myself with people like that,” Zimmerman said. “They’re a pretty easy family to be involved with. They do so much for so many people.”

With the Independence Fund, he speaks “anywhere and everywhere,” but mainly to corporations and businesses.

“I really enjoy talking about the relationship that the military and business have and things we can share from each other,” Zimmerman said.

Though he noted that a lot of people have a “hard time” putting themselves in his situation, he said they shouldn’t.

“I’m no different than them,” Zimmerman said. “If they had to go through what I did, they could do the same things.”

Zimmerman said he has shared his story at VFW district conventions in the past, and he would like to see other veterans do the same.

“[I hope that other veterans] go out and share their stories, and that they realize they never

did anything wrong,” Zimmerman said.

McKellips said he has attended the first speaking engagement for every member of Tiger Team 7 to critique the presentation and offer advice.

“[The audiences] realize that you have made an incredible sacrifice in combat,” McKellips said. “You’re already inspirational, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re motivational. The real training I want to give them is to motivate that audience to rise above [any issues they might be facing].” For more information about Tiger Team 7, visit independencefund.org/tiger-team-7.

This article is featured in the 2019 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.