Marine Amputee Returns to Combat

By Sgt. Ray Lewis, Marine Corps News

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CAMP BARBER, Helmand Province, Afghanistan — There was blood in the water. It was a grim addition to the Iraqi sewage canal usually littered with dead sheep and festering fish.

That's where the Marines of Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division found their comrade after the attack.

Just seconds before, Cpl. Garrett S. Jones was patrolling the streets of Iraq with his team when he was suddenly hurled 15 feet into the air by an enemy booby trap.

"It was just a big dust cloud," said Cpl. Robert C. Pofahl, who stood 10 feet in front of Jones when the bomb detonated. "I ran toward him, and I fell in the canal. The mud was almost up to my knees. It was probably the worst smell you could smell. That's when I saw the blood in the water."

When Pofahl saw Jones lying there, he feared his friend's life was cut short. Barely alive, Jones' life was about to be changed forever.

Pofahl remembers an explosion, tumbling forward, turning back around and hearing Jones yell at the top of his lungs. He then raced to put a tourniquet on Jones' mangled bloody left leg.

"It sounded like I was whispering and because of the explosion, I couldn't catch my breath," Jones said.

When Pofahl arrived at Jones' position, he realized he couldn't lift him out of the canal. The muddy water almost made it impossible for Pofahl to grab a hold of Jones. So, he called two other Marines to help pull Jones out.

"We got him up on the side of the road," Pofahl said. "That's when Navy Hospitalman

Matthew Beceda took over. He cranked the tourniquet one more time, but it snapped. So he had to put another tourniquet on Jones."

Jones was stable, but the Marines couldn't call for help because the radio that Jones was wearing was ruined from the blast. They sent three other Marines from the squad to run 1,200 meters back to their combat outpost for help. A group of Marines stayed with Jones and his squad leader who was also injured by the blast.

The next thing Jones knew, he was on board a helicopter flight headed for the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. He was strapped into a gurney with a military chaplain hovering over him.

"The chaplain asked me if I wanted to pray," said Jones, a 23-year-old Newberg, Ore., native. "We prayed. Then the doctor told me my left leg would be amputated above the knee."

Shortly after, Jones was in surgery. He awoke a couple days later, but said he doesn't recall much after the operation but a phone conversation with his relatives.

"I just remember talking to my family," he said. "I remember saying, 'I hear they make really good prosthetics.'"

Upon leaving the hospital in Germany, Jones was once again strapped into a gurney and flown to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., where his wounds were cleansed and torn flesh was removed from his body.

"It seemed like forever," Jones said. "I had a bunch of tubes stuck in me. I was so drugged up I didn't feel much of anything. I don't remember much, but I do remember that one of my buddies who was shot by a sniper was also on the same flight. I didn't know what happened to him, I just saw that he had a bunch of tubes stuck in his chest."

Military medical officials then transferred Jones to Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCSD) for further treatment. As a result of being restricted to a hospital bed, Jones wound up losing a lot of weight.

"I went from about 160 to 120 lbs.," Jones said. "I was in the bed almost all the time. The only time I got up was to do stretching and go to the bathroom. If I wasn't in my bed, I was in a wheelchair."

During his recovery, Jones had a total of 17 surgeries to clean the infected area in his left leg. He was treated for third-degree burns and shrapnel that peppered his left shoulder and both legs.

On Aug. 20, 2007, Jones was released from NMCSD -- just in time to see his fellow Marines of Echo Company return home from Iraq.

“I was at their homecoming in a wheelchair completely drugged up,” Jones said. “Seeing my guys was emotional for me because we were all so close, and I knew I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for them. When we all get together, it’s like a family reunion. We’re a tight-knit group. We had difficulties at times, but what family doesn’t.”

Jones yearned to be back with his Marine family. Although he didn’t say it, he kept in mind that he one day wanted to serve with the Marines who saved his life.

“We all wanted him back,” Pofahl said. “He’s a good guy to have your back. He’d take the shirt off of his back if you need it. At the same time, we were like, ‘How would he be able to do that because of rehab and all.’”

In the meantime, Jones continued his appointments. In November, he finally linked up with a prosthetist who would help him become familiar with the functions of prosthetics. The prosthetist fit Jones for a total of six walking prosthetics and one snowboarding prosthetic.

An avid fan of snowboarding, Jones realized his potential during a snowboarding trip to Breckenridge, Colo., with fellow wounded warriors from NMCSD and his sister, Sara, in early December 2007. Although Jones had only been on his new prosthetic for two weeks, he was eager to go snowboarding -- a passion of his for more than 15 years.

“The first day, I was able to make it down the mountain,” Jones said. “As the days progressed, I got stronger and more confident on my snowboard.”

Surprisingly, all of the snowboarding helped him deaden some of the nerve endings in his left leg. It also helped him become more accustomed to walking on his prosthetic leg.

“Once I knew I could snowboard again, I realized I was going to be able to do a lot more than just snowboard,” Jones said. “I was like, ‘If I could snowboard, who knows what else I can do?’ It kind of opened my mind up to all the other possibilities.”

Meanwhile, Jones continued his daily physical therapy, stretching, and prosthetic appointments at NMCSD.

“I just kept thinking about my next snowboard trip and getting back to 2/7 ASAP,” Jones said.

Later, in February 2008, Jones was visited by Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen.

James T. Conway. Seizing the moment of this rare opportunity, he asked the Marine commander for orders to return to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Training Center at Twentynine Palms, Calif., so he could once again serve with 2/7.

“I asked to come back to 2/7, and his assistant took my info,” Jones explained. “And, a couple of days later, I had orders back to 2/7. I was so excited I almost didn’t believe it.”

When Jones checked back into his battalion, many of the Marines were awestruck. They couldn’t believe how much progress he had made on a prosthetic leg in less than a year.

“None of us knew how advanced prosthetics were,” Pofahl said. “He’s been called a walking legend, literally. We’re all glad to have him around. He’s a really positive and hard worker; one of those guys who don’t let anything get to him, obviously,” Pofahl said.

Although Jones couldn’t return to the infantry, he was able to serve in other sections within the battalion and was subsequently assigned to the intelligence section where he is relied upon to provide his fellow infantrymen with vital information that can aid in keeping them away from harmful situations.

“At first I didn’t know what I was able to do,” Jones said. “It’s good to be able to do something that will keep Marines safe. Although I can’t be out there with them, I get to directly help them.”

Jones wanted to deploy with his unit when it was ordered to deploy to Afghanistan in April 2008. But, he wasn’t yet ready to undergo the intense Mojave Viper pre-deployment training. Regardless, he would get no handouts despite being a new amputee. Realizing he is still a Marine, he knew he would have to prove himself all over again.

“It wasn’t just a hookup,” Jones said. “I had to do all the training all other Marines do.”

Jones participated in “humvee” scenarios, close quarters combat drills, survival training, machine gun packages, combat life saver courses, and several other pre-deployment courses. Although he had gone through this training before, this was his first time enduring it as an amputee.

“My leg popped off a couple of times in the humvee scenario and once when I was leaving a range,” Jones said. “I thought it was funny because ‘How many guys walk around with combat loads and have a leg fall off?’ I still did it to prove that I could deploy as an amputee.”

Once all physical and administrative requirements were complete, Jones was ready to deploy and help the Marines who once helped him.

"I love being with the guys, the same people. I really do," Jones said. "If it wasn't for the guys in this unit, I wouldn't be here. It's an honor to serve with them and be in a place where many Marines don't get a chance to go."

Recovering in just nine months, Jones has become the fastest recuperating amputee to deploy to a combat zone. Still, many people have doubted his ability to survive a seven-month deployment on a prosthetic limb.

"A lot a people were skeptical of me because I'm a new amputee," Jones said. "It's been a little bit of a challenge for me, mentally at first. People were saying, 'Its going to be hard and I can't do it.' So, being out here was a confidence builder."

Jones still struggles with walking. He said it takes a lot of energy to walk in combat boots for 14 hours a day with all the sweating, straining and refitting inside of his prosthetic leg.

He said he will always feel slight discomfort on his left leg because of nerve and bone growth along the skin line of his amputated leg. But, he considers it a small price to pay when comparing it to losing a life.

"We're talking about a guy who almost died in battle and came back to a similar fight," said Sgt. Paul E. Savage, an intelligence specialist and Boston, Mass., native. "The fact that it didn't scare him to come back to his buddies truly speaks volumes of Cpl. Jones' character."

Jones said he wants to stay in the Marine Corps because he enjoys serving in such a loyal organization. The career retention specialist (CRS) has even submitted a permanent limited duty (PLD) package so he can continue his military career.

"Everyone here has been supportive in helping me get this reenlistment package started. The CRS submitted a PLD package for me back in March 2008. We are still waiting on that to be finished," said a hopeful Jones, expressing how he felt about returning to serve with 2/7. "A lot of people are like family here. I guess that's partly why I'm so happy to be here."

Despite his abrupt loss of limb, Jones remains upbeat and always keeps his peers in high spirits.

"He's always motivated," said Gunnery Sgt. Michael J. Ortiz, battalion intelligence chief and Miami, Fla., native. "His morale is always high. The only time I see him upset is when he sees someone hurt or killed because he takes it personal. But, he always bounces back and visits whoever it is in the hospital to see how they are."

Jones said he personally meets with new amputees to show them there is "light at the end of

the 'canal.'" He wants them to know just because they are an amputee, it doesn't mean that they can't reach their goals.

"I've told them to keep their head up," Jones said. "I want to show them that if I can do it, they can do it. I want to set the example for other amputees. I want to show them that a bad thing might happen, but you can still make good of bad circumstances."

Jones' co-workers all feel that his commitment shows he has authentic concern for his Marines. He also has kept in contact with many wounded warriors when they returned home to the U.S.

"He doesn't know a lot of these Marines, but he doesn't care. I know he's made multiple calls to amputees' doctors to check on how they're doing. I think it's awesome that he does that. It shows that he genuinely cares about his Marines," Ortiz said.

Jones is the first Marine with an above-the-knee amputation to deploy to Afghanistan. There have not been many of these amputees to redeploy to a combat zone to date.

"Ninety percent of the guys in his situation would have likely walked away with their disability and called it a day," Savage said. "But, he's still striving to make a point and it's remarkable."

Jones continues to push his personal, mental and physical limits. When he returns to the U.S., he wants to train in Utah in early December and represent the Marine Corps in adaptive snowboarding. Competitions will be held in Colorado, Canada, and possibly Italy. He said the competitions will help him prepare to compete in the 2010 Paralympics for snowboarding in Vancouver, Canada.

Corporal Jones wants to continue serving with the 1st Marine Division as an intelligence specialist. He also wants to keep helping fellow amputees continue their service in the Marine Corps. He said he is sending a letter to the commandant entitled, "Back on their Feet and Back in the Fleet." The letter entails getting PLD packages completed for more wounded Marines in a timelier manner for those who desire to stay in the Marine Corps.

"Just because you have an injury, it doesn't mean you have to leave the Marine Corps," Jones said. "You just have to work hard. I want to let those guys know back in the States that there is a place for you. I plan on being one of those examples."