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PAULA ZAHN NOW

Wounded Warriors Share Stories

Aired February 3, 2005 - 20:00 ET

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PAULA ZAHN, CNN ANCHOR: Good evening. Welcome. Thanks so much for joining us. Tonight, we focus on a group of brave Americans President Bush himself singled out during last night's State of the Union address, our nation's "Wounded Warriors."

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ZAHN (voice-over): In the chaos of Iraq, they rely on bravery, loyalty, and, yes, on luck.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Every time you go outside, a mortar round can hit right by you and kill you.

ZAHN: Tonight, what happens when luck turns to sacrifice?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I got hit by an RPG.

ZAHN: It happened to Chris Allen and to Randy Nichols (ph).

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I caught two bullets to the leg.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: ... from above me. It hit in my head.

ZAHN: It happened to Tim Maxwell (ph) and Mel Greer (ph).

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I actually got shot in my pistol and then I got shot through my leg.

ZAHN: And it happened to Chris Fesmire.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: If I lived, I was going to lose my legs.

ZAHN: In this next hour, you'll meet the men and women who saved their lives.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: We have got a medevac coming on.

ZAHN: The medics, the pilots.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We've been fired at probably more times than we can count.

ZAHN: The doctors and nurses who every day put others' lives ahead of their own.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: The humanity that's shown in these particular situations gives me hope for the human race.

ZAHN: The race to save our "Wounded Warriors."

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ZAHN: There's been a lot of talk about President Bush's State of the Union address. And one thing he said shouldn't be



overlooked.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: The volunteers of our military are unrelenting in battle, unwavering in loyalty, unmatched in honor and decency, and every day they are making our nation more secure.

Some of our service men and women have survived terrible injuries, and this grateful country will do everything we can to help them recover.

(APPLAUSE)

(END VIDEO CLIP)

ZAHN: And you're about to see exactly what the president was talking about.

Our producer, Alex Quade and cameraman David Allbritton have just returned from Iraq, where they obtained extraordinary access to battlefields and hospitals. Alex also received permission to share the personal stories of wounded soldiers and, for the first time, to even show their faces. The story was shot carefully, respectfully, with privacy in mind.

Still, this is war, and you may find some of the pictures disturbing. But together, we'll witness the unmatched honor and decency of our "Wounded Warriors."

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ALEX QUADE, CNN PRODUCER (voice-over): The firefight, the car bombs, the improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, the wounding of U.S. troops.

So begins their medical journey home. Amidst the chaos, the pain, army medics or Navy Corpsmen take life-saving action. The fight continues around them. This is the first level of treatment. They bandage the fallen, carry them out. If the battle's too hot for a medevac helicopter, it's into vehicles nearby, then onto a fallback position out of the kill zone. This is triage, the next level of care.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: One, two, three, go.

QUADE: Navy shock and trauma platoon members check and clear the wounded. The goal, stabilize the patient and send back to battle or onto the next level of treatment. UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Urgent, urgent, urgent.

QUADE: Urgent means medical evacuation. If the patient can be delivered to a combat field hospital within one hour of being wounded, what's called the golden hour, odds are, he'll survive. In the middle of the Iraqi desert, there's no L.D., no landing zone. A purple smoke grenade guides this helicopter in. The clock is ticking.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Roger.

QUADE: It's time for the medicine man. Medicine man, that's the call sign of the U.S. Army medevac unit. Two pilots, a crew chief and a flight medic in each in Black Hawk.

C.W. 2 HARLEY MAST, MEDEVAC PILOT: Guys in the field would get injured during their battles. And their medics on the scene can only treat them to a certain extent. Our job is to grab them and pick them up and bring them to a hospital or wherever further care is needed for the patient.

QUADE: They get the call on the radio.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: (UNINTELLIGIBLE) pick those guys up?

MAST: Yeah. We can do that.

QUADE: Fire up the bird. The clock is still ticking.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We fly at a pretty high speed with the patients.

QUADE: Care begins in flight. They're brought to the CSH, combat support hospital, or to a forward surgical team and turned over to the surgeons.

Medevac crews do this all day, all night.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: You know, I try and think of myself in their shoes. I'm injured, I'm hurting, maybe I'm bleeding, my life is in danger possibly. I know that my medic's tried his best and can only do so much. And then you hear the aircraft coming in that will take you out of there. The freedom bird, so to speak, and bring you to the hospital and fix you there.

QUADE: That's what happened to Lieutenant Colonel Timothy Maxwell.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We got the call that's litter urgent.

QUADE: A Marine injured, in and out of consciousness.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Picked him up. He'd had a mortar explode in the area. He had shrapnel on through his left side. He had a fractured left leg and a possible fracture in his left arm.

As I make sure all the bleeding is still stopped. I just manage his airway and monitored his vitals all the way back to the CSH.

QUADE: They made it within the golden hour to the next level of care.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: That's a good feeling, when you can get a guy out, within 20 minutes, he's at a hospital. That's just great.

QUADE: Next, the medevac team races to a shock and trauma platoon near the front lines of Fallujah. There, we meet 19-year-old Lance Corporal Chris Allen, in Iraq one month.

LANCE CORPORAL CHRIS ALLEN, U.S. ARMY: I got hit by an RPG, got shrapnel in it -- in my leg. The last thing I remember is just sitting on a corner, providing security and I just heard a boom and the next thing I know, I just felt pain.

Before, I wasn't scared of going out there until that happened. When I've heard the explosions, they went on me before. But that was actually the closest one where I could feel the heat and everything actually hit me. That was pretty scary.

QUADE: The surgeon say Chris' wounds are treatable and decide to keep him here. So, the helicopter takes off without him.

CAPT. BRUCE GILLINGHAM, SURGEON, US NAVY: Any time you put a patient on a helicopter, they're at risk to fire from the ground. Anything that we can treat here definitively, we will.

QUADE: The risk: The medevac helicopter being shot down, like this one.

CAPT. TRENT SHORT, MEDEVAC PILOT, US ARMY: We've been fired at, probably more times than we can count.

QUADE: Per Geneva Convention, medevacs must travel unarmed.

SHORT: Then around flying by an aircraft as it was shot down by a heat seeking missile. That was probably the most unnerving feeling I felt today.

QUADE: It's a lethal lottery.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Terrorists really don't care if we have M-60 on the side of this thing or not, they just shoot at whatever's flying.

QUADE: Evasive maneuvers all they can do. Translation, fancy flying.

CW2 JOSEPH CARROLL, U.S. ARMY MEDEVAC PILOT: We get small arms fire. We see it at night. And during the day-time, we don't see it. So, for us, we don't know if we're getting fired on half the time.

QUADE: They fly as low as 10 feet off the ground.

MAST: We try and not think about that and think about getting the patient out of there as fast as we can.

QUADE: Despite danger, flight medic Sergeant Melinda Gates must treat her patients.

SGT. MELINDA GATES, FLIGHT MEDIC: It's a usually my crew that lets me know that we've been shot at, or that there's burning vehicles or rockets or something. I really don't notice that. I'm more focused on the patients and getting them in the aircraft, getting them treated.

QUADE: We land near Karbala and follow Sergeant Gates to a forward surgical team. Two 19-year-old Marines, PFCs Randy Nichols and Frank Robinson (ph) were patched up here after taking fire.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I was hit -- shot twice in the leg and I caught some shrapnel in the arm.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I had -- ran out of ammo, so I got back in, tried to get more. I turned around to get out and I got hit with a bullet in the shoulder.

QUADE: Randy and Frank are loaded onto litters to go to the next level of care.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: When I was lying on the side of the road and they're bandaging me up there. That's when I kind of got the reality check of everything. I was thinking, wow, I'm actually human again and things do happen and you can get hurt.

QUADE: Sergeant Gates monitor their vitals.

GATES: Medical care has come so far in the past few years guys like that may have died from infection or something like that.

QUADE: The two privates are delivered to the CSH, Combat Support Hospital, Baghdad. Sergeant Gates hands them over to the doctors. They've made it to the E.R.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Where did you get shot?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: In the leg.

QUADE: For now, medevac mission accomplished.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ZAHN: Coming up, "Wounded Warriors" on the wings of hope, soldiers and their saviors carried to safety. And we'll follow one wounded serviceman into the operating room to witness the miracle of modern military medicine.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAHN: We have seen them treated on the battlefield and the dangerous journey in medevac units. Alex Quade takes us now into Saddam Hussein's former private hospital. It's been taken over by the U.S. Army and it's one of the most important medical facilities we now have in Iraq. This is war. Again, some of these pictures may be hard for you to watch.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

QUADE (voice-over): Welcome to the CSH, combat support hospital, Baghdad inside the Green Zone.

SPC. MARK SPEARS, U.S. ARMY: Came off the helicopter. He didn't have a heart rhythm at all. His pulse was -- he was shot in the head.

QUADE: Army Specialist Mark Spears takes over CPR from the flight medic.

SPEARS: We do chest compression to circulate blood, hopefully restore a pulse.

QUADE: This is the E.R. Unlike the TV show, it's real. All too real for 23-year-old Spears.

SPEARS: We keep track of all the Americans who have died on our shift while we work. All the little dots are American soldiers who were killed here in Iraq.

QUADE: He also marks the attacks on his hospital.

SPEARS: I used to keep track how many times we got bombed with lines. But we got bombed a lot more than we get dots. And probably been around like 10 times before I kept track of that.

The Green Zone is a pretty big target for the Iraqis. They like to shoot mortars. We have had a couple of mortar rounds hit the hospital but as you can see it's pretty well fortified. It's always in the back of your mind every time you go outside a mortar round could hit right by you and kill you. There's nothing you can do about it. We try to do our job the best we can and hope for the best.

QUADE: For doctors like Captain Sudip Bose, the work here is raw, dirty, gut wrenching.

CAPT. SUDIP BOSE, U.S. ARMY E.R. PHYSICIAN: Most of them are explosive sort of injuries, like improvised explosive devices, or car bombs or bombs in anything basically, soda cans, cars, dead animals, whatever.

The blood and the guts, you're kind of trained for that as a doctor and you're ready for it. What's different here is there's another level of attachment to your patients, which are the soldiers, because, you know, they're like all of us. They left the states. They're hoping to go back.

QUADE: And the wounded keep coming and coming. SPEARS: We try to save everybody who comes in. So, I mean, of course it's frustrating when we lose people. But you get a little comfort in the fact that we save a lot more people than we lose.

QUADE: It never gets easier, just part of the job.

SPEARS: They bring in a patient and they're hanging on to life. We're ready for it.

QUADE: One of those patients hanging on is a soldier in intensive care, far from home, far from family.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We're all we've got. Nobody goes (INAUDIBLE) ever. So as long as he's here, we're going to be here with him.

QUADE: Squad leader Jason Moore (ph) is talking about his sergeant, Andy Brown (ph), in a coma.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Heading out. Normal patrols, the south. Looking for bad guys. Trying to keep it safe for the airport, and, you know, hit an IED, and it was a bad one.

They had one waiting for us. And it went off. It did a lot of damage to the vehicle. The vehicle doesn't even exist anymore. It looked like the vehicle had just been messed with, with a kid with a can opener. But we got him out. Actually, I had to take another Humvee and rip the doors off with a chain because they were blown inside the vehicle.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: All right, make a hole. Coming through.

QUADE: From the time of the blast, it only took 15 minutes to get Andy to the CSH. Andy's nurse, Major Lisa Snyder (ph), is tending to his wounds while his buddies hover.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I mean, they really, literally saved his life when he first came in here as far as giving him the blood that he needed because otherwise he would have died.

QUADE: Andy's doctor, Colonel Cindy Klaggett (ph).

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Can't really do anything else except worry, fret, pray and give blood. And they're here, 24-hour-a-day vigil. They're sleeping in corners on the floor or not sleeping more often than not. They barely have time to eat. They know he's in a coma, but they lean down and talk to him. They touch him.

QUADE: It's Andy's band of brother.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We donate blood or whatever. We do whatever we can possibly to support him.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: He's just like a brother to us. And we know that he would do the same for us. And we're going to do all we can to help him. UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He's in tough shape. He's in the fight of his life. He would be what I would call as critically ill as anybody could possibly get.

QUADE: Days later, 22-year-old Sergeant Andy Brown died, but not alone.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Even when things started to look like they were just not going to be able to turn around for him, this unit, still, they kind of stood a vigil. And, again, these were guys who, in their regular job, have to go out and be on patrol and get shot at and face the same injuries that this kid did. Even though he's here, half a world away from his family, he had a family with him.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAHN: Balad Air Base is 40 miles north of Baghdad. Here, patients' urgent treatment continues before their journey home. It's a remarkable facility, staffed by remarkable men and women.

"Wounded Warriors" continues.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

QUADE (voice-over): At the Air Force theater hospital, Balad Air Base, Marine Corporal Chris Fesmire is taken off the medevac. A mine took both his legs. He's rushed into E.R.

He's conscious. Although Chris made it through the golden hour, this will be his second operation since wounded just five hours ago.

L.T. COL. DON JENKINS, U.S. AIR FORCE SURGEON: The Navy surgeons at that forward operating base saved his life. And believe it or not, he's quite fortunate to be here with us.

QUADE: In the O.R., alarm red, incoming. We're under attack by mortars or rockets. And this is the most frequently attacked base in Iraq. Despite that, surgeons continue working on Chris.

JENKINS: We have built up as best we can around those operating theaters with big concrete and sandbags and that sort of thing. Still alarm red.

Those folks that aren't scrubbed in, in sterile gear, do have the opportunity if they get to their gear safely to put on their helmet and their flight vest. We don't stop what we're doing just because this attack is going on.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Chris, you're doing great, buddy. Chris, you're doing great.

QUADE: Chris is then taken to ICU, where we meet up again with Lieutenant Colonel Tim Maxwell (ph). He's in critical condition, in and out of consciousness. Alarm red again. CAPT. DEBRA NICHOLS, U.S. AIR FORCE: It means that there's imminent danger. Most of the time, you know, we're under attack.

QUADE: Maxwell's nurse stays by his side.

NICHOLS: You can't leave them because they're critical patients. So you have stay at the bedside and go ahead and perform your duties, just like if you were not in a code red. Yes, this is heavy, and it's hot, and I can't wait to get out of it, because it hurts my back.

QUADE: Alarm red finally over, but their work here today has just begun.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Baghdad is bringing two helicopters full.

QUADE: Full of casualties from two bombs exploding in Baghdad's Green Zone.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Just take a deep breath. You know what you've got to do. Manpower, roll them into the E.R. as we need be, as we deem it critical or not critical. And then we'll go from there. OK? Everybody ready?

QUADE: The medevacs arrive, patient after patient. This is what's called a mass casualty. The medevacs bring more and more. And they race to the E.R.

Air Force medic Sergeant Jacqueline Horton tries to ease them.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: When they come in off the chopper, especially, they're disoriented. And we tell them over and over again that we're going to stay with us, that you're not alone, remind them that we're there with them and ask them if they need more for pain. We tell them exactly what we're doing to them, so that there's no surprises because of the fear, the magnitude of the fear that they're experiencing, the unknown.

That's the only comforting thing that those parents back home have, is to think that somebody is over here talking to them.

QUADE: That comforting personal attention is evident at the next level of care, too.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: A little lower, lower.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It's like a medical air terminal.

QUADE (voice-over): For the wounded, the CASF, contingency aeromedical staging facility, is the last stop in Iraq.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Prepare to lift. Lift. Prepare to lower. Lower. Make sure that he's even.

TECH. SGT. GEORGE DENBY, U.S. AIR FORCE: We get them here. We get them medicated and we get them comfortable.

QUADE: Here, we meet Gunnery Sergeant Mel Greer (ph), shot in the leg, ambushed in the dangerous city of Ramadi.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Basically, from my ankle down, I can't feel my foot whatsoever.

QUADE: This is his platoon under fire.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We were out on a vehicle patrol and stopped to do a vehicle checkpoint and we had some insurgents come around the corner and open up with automatic weapons and small fires.

QUADE: And this is Mel's combat video.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We got Gunny. He's hit in the right leg.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Automatic weapons fire, it's less than a tenth of a second between rounds. It hit my pistol and hit my leg, knocked me down and hell's fury just unleashed.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: There it goes. Good shot.

QUADE: He's taken fire countless times.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Just that night prior, I had only gotten about three hours of sleep in the last 30 hours. We had gone out on a security run. And the boxcar got hit by three IEDs and the small-arms fire. And less than 12 hours later, we right were back out and got hit again. So, being aggressive.

QUADE: Mel and other patients must wait here for the next plane out of country. Tech Sergeant George Denby, an emergency medic for 18 years, checks on them.

DENBY: Is that too cool?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: No. It feels good.

DENBY: Really? You need a blanket or anything?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I'm good.

DENBY: All right.

QUADE: He works closely with Master Sergeant Nancy Peck (ph), an emergency medic for 21 years. It's hard, even for these seasoned vets.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: They pull at your heartstrings, their sacrifice. They're humble. They don't want to go back home. They want to go back to the fight, back to the unit. Some of these patients that we get here, they haven't bathed in days. They've eaten out of a box. They don't have a pillow to sleep on.

QUADE: The medics try everything to keep them comfortable.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We have some patients with some pretty serious patients right next. And you're right next to another patient. So, not only are you worrying about your own problems, but you're worrying about the guy next to you. And so we try to do everything we can to keep their minds off of that.

QUADE: The singing doesn't tempt PFC Matthew Solberg (ph). The 19-year-old Marine has trouble speaking after an IED exploded near him.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We're kind of used to that stuff after being here for a while. You just kind of get over it and do your job.

QUADE: Then alarm red incoming.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: You got your gear?

QUADE: In the middle of all this, more wounded arrive, among them, Lance Corporal Chris Allen, injured by a rocket-propelled grenade near Falluja. Like all patients, Chris is checked for hidden explosives, then checked medically.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I'm doing pretty good, much better from when I saw you guys the first time.

QUADE: But flashbacks are bothering him.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Yes, all the time. Usually when I'm sleeping, it comes back.

QUADE: The touches of home here, courtesy of the medics, help Chris.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Little flag's cool. I love this one. This is going to be with me all the time now. So, whenever I get down, I can just think of it and realize what I'm fighting for. And a little picture, it says thank you.

QUADE: Chris and Mel and the other patients will head to the plane next, the plane that will take them out of Iraq.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

QUADE (voice-over): While the patients are being prepped, flight medics are prepping the plane. They transform a C-141 -- from tactical to practical, from cargo plane to flying hospital.

MAJ. MARK NAGEL, FLIGHT MEDIC, USAF: Yes, we have about 65 patients for seven people to take care of, so we'll be busy tonight. But the patients will be glad to go home.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: This is for emergency ops. This isn't even our job yet.

NAGEL: That's part of our job.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: It's part of our job. NAGEL: Health care provider/construction workers.

QUADE: Back at the cathit (ph) or medical air terminal...

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Lift, lift.

QUADE: The patients like Gunny Sergeant Mel Greer are ready to go.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: My country will take care of me, no matter what.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: OK. Lift, lift.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Got it?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Got it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Got it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Got it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Got it.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Good job, guys.

QUADE: Past the tank barriers and on to the next level of care, the plane.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Come to me, come to me, come to me.

QUADE: The flight medics are now ready.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Move. Move.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Hopefully I'll return to My marines. My wife probably doesn't want to hear that.

QUADE: Litter patients like Mel, first.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Thank you, sir, for your service. We really appreciate it. Good luck.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: (UNINTELLIGIBLE) we're going to rack them. (UNINTELLIGIBLE). All right, ready, rack. Watch your step.

(CROSSTALK)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Watch his foot.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Watch his foot.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: You all right now.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I feel good bud.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Bye-bye.

QUADE: Next, ambulatories like PFC Matthew Solberg (ph). Matthew has a speech problem from a head injury.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: (UNINTELLIGIBLE) your seat belt and put it on.

QUADE: Then Lance Corporal Chris Allen, hit by an RPG. Chris needs a little help boarding. Last on, critical patients from intensive care. Marine Corporal Chris Fesmire, a mine took both his legs. Chris is coming straight from surgery. Then Lieutenant Colonel Tim Maxwell who took shrapnel to the head from a mortar. Maxwell was in the ICU during alarm red.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: One, two, three.

TECH. SGT. GEORGE DENBY, EMERGENCY MEDIC, USAF: MALE: Look at some of these injuries, they just punch you right in the stomach. So, you feel sorry, but you're happy that they're getting out of here. You know, you're happy for them. OK, they're going. You know, they're closer to seeing their families and going home.

QUADE: This is the last thing the wounded warriors will see in Iraq. The plane goes dark for tactical takeoff. This is light discipline, only low red light until we clear Iraqi air space. For those who can, vest and helmet, in case of incoming fire. This is hostile territory. The tactical takeoffs spirals to avoid any ground fire hurts Matthew's head. The flight medics go to work, using chemical glow sticks or tiny lights, they squeeze between patients and litters. Cargo lights shine briefly in back. Matthew uses it to climb into a litter to rest his head. After clearing Iraqi air space, lights on. Chris also tries to get comfortable, heavy flack vests come off. Mel's restless. Medics are working on patients beside and above him, climbing up the stacks of litters around them, he worries they'll step on his injured leg and foot. Accidentally, they do. It's difficult work under difficult conditions.

CAPT. SS YACOUB, CRITICAL CARE DOCTOR, USAF: I have to keep them alive because we can have the best doctors back home, if we can take them there and keep them alive on the way, they can do anything for them back home.

QUADE: About six hours later, touchdown. Ramstein Air Base, Germany. The patients are off loaded. Chris looks around at the rain, the cold.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Move, move.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Rather keep them in here than out there in the rain.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Got it?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Got it.

QUADE: Matthew wakes up, and Mel is tucked in against the freezing temperatures.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Move, move.

QUADE: Next stop, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, the next level of care. They arrive at the biggest military hospital outside the U.S.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: How are you doing, Mel?

QUADE: Mel is headed straight to more surgery.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Lower, lower.

QUADE: Next, Matthew. And in socks, his boots still in Iraq, Chris. In the O.R., Mel is prepped. The surgeon scrubs in. He examines Mel's leg wounds.

MAJ. TIM WOOD, SURGEON, USAF: He's luckily he didn't hit the bone. He's lucky he didn't hit the artery. It's at risky for an infection, so we're trying to minimize his risk for infection.

QUADE: The speed through all of the levels of care, through the battlefield, helped.

WOOD: Yes, our air evac system right now is unbelievable. We hear what happens in the news pretty much. And you know, within 24, 48 hours these guys are getting into our hospital, and we're having to take care of them.

QUADE: Half an hour later...

WOOD: Hey guys open your eyes. Can you open your eyes? Hey, we're all done, bro. We're all done. You did great.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We're done. Do you have any pain right now?

QUADE: Chris, meanwhile, is getting his wounds cleaned.

They've already did an X-ray after they took it out to make sure all the shrapnel, because sometimes shrapnel is left in people. And it's -- does more harm to go into it to get it, than it does to get it. And a lot of times (UNINTELLIGIBLE) the body will push it out on its own.

QUADE: Mel rolls in.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: How's your pain, buddy?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: (UNINTELLIGIBLE)

QUADE: Even groggy, he's still a Marine.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Thank you, sir.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: You're welcome.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Thanks for the ride.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: They took off the little splint that was down there today, so I can actually play with my foot a little bit.

QUADE: But Mel still has no feeling in his foot. (UNINTELLIGIBLE) doctors at the next level of care can do anything about that.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It's amazing, you know, I was hit on Saturday, and to each level of care that I've moved up to is -- I think it's Tuesday now, and I've already had a second surgery. I've already been taken care, already been cleaned. I'm in Germany. And I'm getting ready to go home already. It's just amazing.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

QUADE: And coming up next, soldiers on the mend. You're going to see how far they've come and witness their determined spirit, right after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAHN: Our "Wounded Warriors" have come a long way since their battlefield injuries. Producer, Alex Quade checked in on them at military hospitals all over the country. Listen now to their personal stories.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

QUADE (voice-over): Lieutenant Colonel Tim Maxwell took shrapnel to the head after a mortar attack. He was in the ICU during Alarm Red. Now Maxwell is at the V.A. hospital in Richmond, Virginia. He's doing physical and speech therapy.

LT. COL. TIM MAXWELL, INJURED IN BATTLE: I don't remember much. I think about 18 minutes or so, not very long, but they did a good job of getting it fixed up.

QUADE: His goal: get back to racing triathlons.

MAXWELL: I can do them, sure.

QUADE: We met another iron man, Corporal Chris Fesmire at Balad Air Base. A mine took both his legs.

Chris is now at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. During therapy, Chris shares for the first time what happened when his Humvee hit the mine.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: And as I was like up like this, my legs were just dangling down like a rag doll. And I knew that -- I knew from there that if I lived, I was -- you know, I was going to lose my legs.

That was probably the biggest fight, was just to live, because I could feel myself, all the blood leaving my body through my legs. It was like -- it was just draining out of me. At that point, you know, I tried to hold onto somebody's hand, and I knew I was going to -- I knew I was going to die, but just thought to myself, you know, there's a lot of things I have to live for, and I couldn't -- I couldn't die in that place.

QUADE: Chris plans to get out of the corps, get a Ph.D., and teach English.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I've got to keep myself going really well in order to walk again, because that's what I want more than anything else.

QUADE: The other Chris, Lance Corporal Chris Allen was injured near Fallujah.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I got hit by an RPG.

QUADE: Chris is now back at Camp Pendleton, California.

PFC Matthew Solberg (ph) is also at Camp Pendleton.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Don't really remember much.

QUADE: His speech back to normal after a head injury from an IED.

And remember PFCs Randy Nichols and Frank Robinson? They were shot in a firefight near Karbala. We never expected to be invited to Randy's wedding.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Randy, will you have Amanda to be your wedded wife?

PFC RANDY NICHOLS, INJURED IN IRAQ: I will.

QUADE: This, the day right before Randy reported back to Camp Lejeune.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: You may kiss your bride.

QUADE: And finally, Gunnery Sergeant Mel Greer. Mel had leg surgery in Germany. Now it's more surgery at the naval hospital at Camp Pendleton.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I'm going to put your chin up. Take some nice deep breaths for me.

QUADE: This is Mel's fourth operation since coming home. He still has nerve damage in his foot.

GUNNERY SGT. MEL GREER, WOUNDED IN IRAQ: There's nothing you can do because his nerve's intact, it's just been -- it's not been transected, just severely bruised from the injury from the AK-47.

QUADE: Afterwards... GREER: There's a lot of frustration, because it's never a moment of rest. You know, my -- the actual gunshot wound doesn't hurt, but the recovery of the leg, it's coming awake at certain points and pieces, and the nerves are exploding.

But I also feel guilty that I'm not back in Iraq with my Marines that are out there, and knowing that some are injured just recently and another was killed just recently. It's very hard, you know, trying to sit here and realizing that, hey, I'm okay, but what about my Marines, and what about the Marines, all of the Marines in Iraq? You know, it's tough.

QUADE: Not all the wounded warriors we met in Iraq made it home alive.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: They always make it very clear to us that he was very, very critical.

QUADE: We met Sergeant Andy Brown at the combat support hospital in Baghdad. Despite the efforts of his surgeons and his unit standing by and giving blood, Andy lost the fight. His parents, Bill and Laura Brown (ph).

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: We were really crushed that we couldn't be there with him. And the men took turns, and they stayed with him the whole time. And he was -- he was never alone. And that meant a great deal to us.

QUADE: Since they couldn't be there, we shared our video of their son's last hours.

STAFF SGT. JASON MOORE, ANDY'S SQUAD LEADER: We're all we've got, and with us, nobody goes home, ever, so as long as he's here, we're going to be here with him.

COL. CINDY CLAGETT, ANDY'S DOCTOR: Even though he's here, half a world away from his family, he had a family with him, and that he was incredibly cared for by virtually everybody that -- that was around him.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I know he was well taken care of.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It was good to see it. In my heart and in my mind, I realize everyone did everything they possibly could.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I'm hoping that people don't forget our men in uniform, and our women in uniform, and all the people who are there with them, fighting with them and helping support them. It's not just the soldiers. It's the doctors, the nurses, the Red Cross.

QUADE: It's also the medics, the aircrews, an entire military operation trying to get each patient to the next level of care, trying to get each wounded warrior home.

(END VIDEOTAPE) ZAHN: Alex, what heroes, what heroines. We all have respect for the brave mission these men and women are up against, but it's not until you go behind the scenes the way you did that you can fully appreciate how their lives are on the line day in, day out.

QUADE: Paula, we were so impressed by every single one of these soldiers that we met, the bravery, their character. They are going through such a painful time. It's a very scary time. And yet they let us with our cameras -- they let all of us, really, into their lives to share their stories.

And the military, the medical personnel, the doctors, the nurses, the aircrews, the medics, they, every single one of them, said how honored they are to be doing what they're doing to get these wounded people home.

ZAHN: We salute them all. Alex, thanks so much.

QUADE: Thank you.

ZAHN: Tonight Alex has introduced us to troops who have sacrificed so much for America and the people of Iraq. And through her reporting and the remarkable photography of David Albriton, they traced the paths of wounded warriors, like Gunnery Sergeant Mel Greer, who's now back home with his loved ones and adjusting to his new life. You'll meet him next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAHN: Welcome back.

One of the wounded Americans we followed in Alex Quade's report was Marine Gunnery Sergeant Mel Greer. He is back in the U.S. recovering from his extensive leg injury, and he joins me now.

Welcome home.

GREER: Thank you.

ZAHN: It's so great to see you, so inspiring to hear your story. So here you are tonight, after nine surgeries, and still no feeling in your right foot. What do the doctors say is in store for you?

GREER: They're looking at possible -- and I use possible to the greatest extent -- of amputating my right leg just as a means of recovery, because I have no neurological feeling or muscle control of my leg. If I injured myself or cut myself, I wouldn't feel it and could bleed to death.

But that is a last means as a resort for me, medical-wise. So we're still doing tests, EMG tests, three or four of the different things to try to recover. I do physical therapy daily. And it's just a matter of time to see if the nerve is going to recover. And at this point it hasn't. It's actually gotten worse.

But I want to be in the Marine Corps, you know, more than anything, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to stay in the Marine Corps and make my 20 years and retire with the respect and dignity that goes with it, and serve my country.

ZAHN: I think you've earned that.

GREER: It's very hard to sit at home right now and know that my battalion is still over there fighting, and I'm at home doing the things that I do for myself. And it's hard for a Marine to do only for himself and not for his peers or his buddies.

ZAHN: Help us understand that sense of guilt you were talking about. I believe the interview was done in Germany, after you'd been transported to Landstuhl, where in spite of this terrible injury you sustained, you did feel a little bit guilty, didn't you?

GREER: Always. It -- you grow as a team and you grow as a family through training and through all of the missions that you go together, and you build that brotherhood and that bond that is indescribable to people that have never worked in that atmosphere.

And then to be separated from it, against your will, it's very hard, because, you know, I'm looking at a simple gunshot. Why can't I be there? And it's not something I can control because of the nerve damage and stuff, but I feel that I can be there doing something with my Marines.

And doctors tell me, you know, you can't. You need to be here to recover. And it's selfish of me to want to, you know, be with my Marines and fight, because that's what I'm trained to do, and that's what my nation pays me to do. And I want to be there with my Marines, and I want to come home with my battalion comes home.

ZAHN: What was so incredible to watch as you went through these various phases was your attitude. You never cracked. You maintained that courage, you maintained that sense hope.

GREER: I think everybody does, to be honest with you, because you know there's a nation that supports you. You know there's a family that supports you. You know that, if at any time you need something, they're there for you.

ZAHN: As we say goodbye to you, I'd like for you to share with our audience right now the Purple Heart that you earned.

GREER: This is, obviously, presented to all the...

ZAHN: If you could hold it up.

GREER: Marines, soldiers and sailors -- I'll take the plastic cap off for you. It's presented to the Marines, soldiers and sailors in the hospitals. And it's a hard thing to get, and it's something you don't want to have presented to you. But it's a very prideful thing to have, as well, to know that your nation has given this to you. And it's amazing.

ZAHN: Well, we absolute your service. GREER: Well, thank you very much.

ZAHN: And your courage.

GREER: Thank you for having me tonight.

ZAHN: You've inspired us all.

GREER: Thank you.

ZAHN: And we expect to see you hit that 20-year mark.

GREER: I'm fighting.

ZAHN: We'll be rooting for you.

GREER: I'm fighting to stay in. I know the Marine Corps will take care of me. The Marine Corps will take care of me.

ZAHN: Yes. Thank you.

GREER: Thank you.

ZAHN: Good luck to you. We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAHN: About 1,400 U.S. troops have died in Iraq. The number of wounded, more than 10,000. Yet when compared to America's other wars, the percentage who live is the highest on record, thanks to the advances and quality of their treatment. We're all grateful for that.

I'd also like to thank Alex Quade and her husband, photographer David Albriton (ph), for this extraordinary behind the scenes look at the sacrifices made by our military.

Thanks so much for joining us tonight. "LARRY KING LIVE" is next with Dr. Phil taking your calls, plus a candid conversation with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Again, thanks for joining us tonight. Good night.

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