

## When you stop saying no, more opportunities come

**Chris:** Chris, United States Marine Corps, February 2005 till May 2010. I served in Iraq in 2007. I was Fire Team Leader and they were about to control so I just came off of watch, I didn't have to go out on patrol with them, but I wanted to give one of my boys a break, so I took the radio from him and was like "You just chill in the wire and I'll go out." So we don't say anything. The villagers are really friendly and everything. The goats, the kids were playing soccer.

We go to the bridge, well before that actually, a guy comes across the bridge and we're like "There's something not right about this guy." There's this sixth sense. When you're there long enough, you could just kind of feel people and you could tell what's off. But we can't just go off of suspicion. So we get this guy, we check him, and everything checks out on him, so we're like "Keep an eye on him while we go across the bridge."

So two-by-two across the bridge and because I'm carrying a radio, I'm next to the Squad Leader and I'm in the middle of the patrol, so we're going across the bridge, and I'm talking with my Staff Sergeant, my Squad Leader, and he looks at me. You're supposed to keep a dispersion or the distance between, but we were having a conversation and he was like "Hey, you know we're walking a little close" and I'm like "Yeah, yeah. We are. Alright, why don't you slow down?" And no sooner than he said that I woke up in the hospital and I didn't even know what the hell happened. I forgot I was in Iraq, I didn't know anything.

I knew I was in the Marine Corps still. I didn't know what happened. I had no idea but I knew this wasn't right so I start pulling out things, out of my arms, I start trying to get up and walk out of bed. I didn't make it too far. I was in a coma for a couple of days and I could barely remember Iraq. I could barely remember much of anything and when I asked the doctors they didn't know what the hell had happened to me either. They were like "You got blown up."

I thought I was hit in a vehicle, I was asking "What happened to my boys? What happened to my turret gunner? What happened to my driver? What happened to the crew in back? What happened to this marine, this marine, and this marine? And they were like "We don't know." That was the worst feeling not knowing what happened to your boys, especially because I was a Vehicle Commander. That means I did something wrong, so as I found out later on I was on foot. That made me feel so much better because I was the only one hit. It was like taking a load off my back.

When I first came to, everything was in casts; left arm, left leg, right leg. My right arm was the only thing not messed up. I didn't know the severity of my injuries so I asked the doctors, "How long before I can go back? When can I go back?" They were like "Six weeks. Just give it a few weeks and your bones will heal and you can go back over there." I'm like "Alright, awesome." Six weeks turned into 12 weeks. Twelve weeks turned to 18 weeks. Eighteen weeks turned into 16 months.

I actually had all of my limbs when I came to in Maryland and they really didn't tell me too much about amputation. They told me they were considering it, but, not worry about it now. Then when I got transferred to Balboa, the Naval Hospital in San Diego, I had to go through physical therapy and everything, but I still had a lot of hardware on me. A lot of external fixators and everything. I go down there and they told me I should consider



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amputation. They told me that wasn't an option. I wasn't cutting anything off. I came into war with it. I ain't taking it off. It's going out with me. And I cried for a couple of days, almost as hard as when I cried when I found out my boys were gone.

Then I met a couple amputees, actually. I didn't even know they were amputees. They come strutting in my room and sitting down to talk with me. And I'm like "Alright man, what do you know? Whatever." Then he gets up and he walks out and he's got shorts on and he's missing his dog gone leg. I was like "Whoa." Then I go down to the physical therapy, the C5 Unit there, and there was a guy doing backflips down the hallway with one leg. I was like "Hmmm, not bad." Then the option of amputation started seeming a little better.

They told me they could fuse it and save my leg and that would probably mean that I could not stand in the Marine Corps. I could not run again. And so many things that I would not be able to do, and then I remember seeing the guy doing back flips and I was like "If you can do a backflip on one leg, what's the point on having two legs when you can't do anything with them?" So I told them to cut it off.

When they cut it off, it was really odd. It really kind of screws up your image of yourself, you know? I hated going out when I didn't have my leg, when I actually didn't have my prosthetic because people looked, people asked. I had to talk and I had to talk to people I didn't know and that was the hardest thing because it's frustrating when you try and talk to people that don't understand. You kind of go into this bubble and you don't want to leave the bubble. It usually consisted of home, work, and a select few friends. You don't want to interact with anything outside of that bubble. You don't want to go to stores, you don't want to go to movies.

For the longest time all these great opportunities were coming up and because I was in my bubble I refused to participate in them. I wasn't gonna do anything. Snowboarding? Uh uh. I ain't doing it. Cycling, going to car races, I ain't doing it. If I gotta leave my room for any more than 12 hours, it ain't happening.

There's a bridge that goes from San Diego to Coronado, the island, and it's the Bay Bridge. And every year, around May, they have a 5k run/walk over the bridge. All of these people were gonna run it and I was still in my wheelchair. I had my leg but I wasn't really supposed to walk. My left arm was still messed up. I still had a one-arm drive wheelchair so I had to do it with my one arm. My friend was like "I'll do it with you. I'll push you up it and we'll go out and do it."

So I did it. I went up the bridge and coming down the bridge, the wheelchair broke. So that was really my first time walking without anything. I walked across the finish line and it was great. The people there were clapping and the people were happy and excited and I was like "Wow this feels good. I like this." The whole "no" to everything stopped that day. I stopped saying no. If I had no reason to say no, I wasn't going to. That's probably the best thing that's ever happened to me. When you stop saying no to everything so many more opportunities come along and that's what really got me out of that bubble- that day and the bridge. It opened up so much.

I actually had a good friend of mine, one of the guys that saved my life, he came back from deployment and he was deployed many times, and he's come back fine. But this time he's come back and we just couldn't understand why he was sad all of the sudden and why he was mad and why he cried all the time, all this stuff happening to him. He



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thought there was something wrong with him. Why all the guys he was there with him weren't doing it. I had to tell them that they are doing it. They just hide it, just like you're hiding it. The only thing wrong with you is not going to get help because it takes true strength to ask for help and he did. And he's doing a lot better now.

You can't be fine coming back from some of the things that you've went through that happens over there. It's just impossible. It's okay to not be okay. It's okay to go get help. It's okay to talk to people. Your situation may be unique but it's not the only one like it. Somebody else has been through it. Somebody else is willing to help you through yours. You have to ask and you have to talk.



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