

BrainLine Talks With Sarah and Ted Wade

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Video Link: <http://www.brainline.org/content/multimedia.php?id=754>

Their Personal Story

Sarah Wade: Ted joined the Army in 2000, I guess—Spring of 2000 and was sent to Fort Bragg to the Second Airborne. After September 11th Ted was deployed to Afghanistan in early 2002 and then later on in 2003 would be deployed to Iraq fairly early in the conflict there. On the 14th of February, 2004, he was on a mission near Moladea, Iraq, not far from Fallujah, and an Improvised Explosive Device was detonated underneath his Humvee. Ted was unconscious at the scene, been hit in the head with a piece of shrapnel and his helmet had blown off of his head.

He also had a traumatic amputation. His right arm was completely severed in the blast and would be later taken to the Hospital in Baghdad, and transported to Germany a couple of days later. In Germany things were pretty bad. His situation started to deteriorate and the doctors, they weren't real hopeful. Ted was transferred to a German hospital from Baghdad because the Air Force Flight Surgeons were not confident they could get Ted back to the States alive at that point.

So he was sent to a civilian hospital in Germany and at that point was expected to stay in Germany until he passed away. I don't think anyone was confident they were gonna get him back to the States alive. And at that point his father and I were approached by the doctors and given the option to withdraw life support if that's what we chose to do. And thankfully we were lucky and had good instincts and made the right decision in that situation. Ted took a—made a big improvement.

He really started to rebound about maybe 10 days after the injury. Ted started to show signs that things were getting better and at that point the military doctors decided that (a) things may be hopeful and that (b) they could get him back to Walter Reed in one piece. Well, I say one piece. You weren't in one piece. [LAUGHTER] You were missing an arm but that's probably not a good way to term it. But anyway... And about two weeks after you got injured... You were injured on February 14, 2004, and on March 2, 2004 we made the flight together back from Germany to Andrews Air Force Base and went to Walter Reed Army Medical Center and was in the Intensive Care Unit there for a few weeks.

And that's where things started to get scary again. I had gotten my hopes up when Ted's condition started to improve in Germany only to get back to the States and Ted's coma persisted. And after a few weeks, maybe four or five—six weeks things start to not be so hopeful that someone's gonna wake up. And you stayed in a coma for a good two and a half months. At that point you started to show some signs of being in there, like pretending—closing your eyes and pretending to be asleep when a nurse would come in to check his vital signs or check his blood pressure.

I think also one of the clear signs you were getting better was that you were being difficult, not letting people brush your teeth except the people you liked. There were only certain nurses that could brush your teeth. But Ted eventually started to climb out of the coma, spoke to a speech therapist. First time they tried to see if they could get you to safely swallow soft foods, Katie Sullivan fed you some ice cream and you asked her for more. She said if she'd known she would have fed you ice cream weeks before then.

But Ted spoke those first words and then didn't say anything for a few weeks after that. [LAUGHTER] But maybe after about... It was probably six months after the injury that you were starting to walk and talk. At that point you were in the VA Poly-Trauma Center that's in Richmond, Virginia, and spent five

and a half months there. That's where he learned to walk again, learned to talk again, dress, all the basics. And from there we went home, home back to North Carolina, and Ted started going to our local VA hospital. And you were only there for a few weeks. Ted was transferred to an extended care facility that was at our VA hospital and they didn't have the expertise and the—I guess the resources they need to give—to give Ted what he really needed to get better.

So at that point we made a decision with the primary care team that he was working with for Ted to go back to Walter Reed. One of the big concerns at that point was Ted doing amputee rehabilitation and learning how to use the prosthesis. And that takes some very specialized care, very specialized... It's a very specialized field of prosthetics but also occupational therapists to do the prosthetic training. There's not a lot of occupational therapists that encounter arm amputations so we decided Walter Reed was the best place to go.

And spent a few months there doing amputee rehabilitation in early 2005. But Ted started to have some other health issues related to the brain injury that Walter Reed just wasn't equipped to treat and ended up going back to North Carolina. And at that point our VA hospital found a local provider that has significant experience with brain injury. And we became road warriors at that point. There wasn't a good option in North Carolina for Ted's amputee rehabilitation and there wasn't a good option at Walter Reed.

It wasn't that there wasn't a good option in Washington; it was just at that point the way benefits were for the military and their health insurance, Tri-Care, they weren't able to pay for what Ted needed in the Washington, D.C. area. So it wasn't for any lack of caring of the doctors at Walter Reed; they just weren't able to get Ted to the care he needed. They didn't have a way to get it paid for. So we did a lot of bouncing around and, wow, for about four years we traveled back and forth between Walter Reed and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, trying to balance out your injuries.

And now we've hit a point where we can relocate to the Washington, D.C. area. Four and a half years this month, I guess. August, August 14th. Huh! And we're gonna relocate to the Washington, D.C. area and start over here. I think one of the things that was difficult was deciding where home was gonna be.

Ted Wade: Available care here is much higher than what's available in North Carolina. We are still gonna go back to North Carolina for TBI and neuro...

Sarah Wade: Your neuro-psychiatrist.

Ted Wade: Yes. And one of the largest problems that I still have is that I—I'm trying to form sentences and I, originally when I started speaking, had a sentence and it's—as I started or (inaud.), started to finish what I was thinking, it dropped out of my train of thought. And now I have to wander and think about—or wonder and think about...

Sarah Wade: You were discussing that we wanted to move to—why we were moving to Washington, D.C. And I think one of the things that is tough when you get injured, if you've been in the military—I guess if you're active duty it would be different maybe through National Guard or a Reservist but military you don't choose where you live. You're stationed wherever it makes most sense for whatever your particular job is in the military. And so a lot of times you live somewhere that's not necessarily home.

And when you get injured, one of the dilemmas is trying to figure out where home is and where you wanna relocate to. That's something we didn't know immediately and a lot of it was based on what kind of care Ted needed. And I think we arrived on moving to the Washington, D.C. area because I grew up here. Ted grew up all over the country so you don't really know where you call home. So that was an advantage for me winning where we lived. [LAUGHTER] But I think also when we looked—when we really sat down and went over all the different types of providers that Ted needed, one of the hardest

components to find was an upper extremity prosthetist.

There are options within the VA system but those options require someone traveling to see Ted if we were in North Carolina, and it's just not as convenient. So we decided that there are brain injury resources in the Washington, D.C. area that military has an incredible amputee program, but also, I think, one of the shortcomings we had in North Carolina was good primary care. Ted just never really had anybody at our VA hospital in North Carolina that was—wasn't...

I better be careful how I say that. It wasn't that they were a bad primary care doctor; it's that Ted had a set of injuries that they weren't used to dealing with. And Ted's had really good primary care at Walter Reed in the past with some of their physicians that work with blast injuries there and it just made most sense to be in this area to be able to put together the best expertise for all his different injuries.

Ted Wade: I guess (ph.). I'm (inaud.)...

Sarah Wade: It's okay.

Sarah Wade: You're trying too hard.

Ted Wade: Jim Maher, who also has a combat injury also, worked for Wounded Warrior Program.

Sarah Wade: Jim Maher is your mentor, I guess, through the program that Walter Reed has. Walter Reed for a while now... I think they started it during Desert Storm, actually. Their amputee program and the rehabilitation program at Walter Reed has teamed up with some veterans from Vietnam and some veterans... Mr. Porter got injured in Korea. They're veterans from previous wars that lost limbs that have gone on to lead successful and full lives who have come back to give back to this younger generation of veterans.

And Walter Reed paired up with the Amputee Coalition of America and set up a wonderful mentoring program. And I think one of the exciting things, one of the reasons why you wanna be close to Walter Reed and the Bethesda Naval Hospital is Jim Maher, Ted's mentor, is trying to expand the program for other types of injuries and is hoping for you to help him out with that, to reach out to some of the families. We've... One of the things we've definitely found is a lot of times someone who's been through what Ted has, during the early stages when you were unconscious, it was absolutely terrifying not knowing what to expect.

I would have loved to have had someone to talk to who had some first-hand knowledge, also to talk to somebody who had just survived. [LAUGHTER] Someone to tell me you're gonna get through it, you know. But I think one of the things that's been really interesting to watch with Ted is he has visited a few families at Walter Reed and at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda where their family member is still unconscious. And Ted's been introduced to them through some of his former nurses or other hospital staff.

And it's really been interesting to see you be an inspiration to a family member. I think what's important is... I think for someone to recover it's very important to keep their family member who's taking care of them in the fight. And I think one of the things you've been able to do is give people hope.

Ted Wade: It was the following year after and the first chance to get married, we got married.

Sarah Wade: The week you got out of the hospital. You were injured in February and got a little... They let you out of the hospital just in time for Thanksgiving. I think it was two days before Thanksgiving. It was Thanksgiving week. That was the goal, get Ted out of the hospital for the holidays and let him

spend Thanksgiving at home. And I guess we had decided we were getting married before you went to Iraq and we really regretted having waited. [LAUGHTER]

We should have just gotten married before you left. We were naïve in thinking that we were gonna have a nice, big wedding with everyone there and I guess once you got injured none of that stuff was important anymore. I think that—I think what sunk in was when Ted got injured. When you were really fighting for your life, I think one of the things that really hit me was I really regretted not having gotten married because I thought I was gonna lose him and I was never gonna have that opportunity.

And I remember at one point saying in the car when we left the hospital in Germany and we were driving back to the Regional Medical Center, to the Fisher House there where we were staying, your parents and I in the car were in shock because the doctors hadn't had very good prognosis that day. And I remember saying, you know, how can you be a widow if you never got married? It was just—it was—it was strange but I wasn't waiting any... When you got out of the hospital, I wasn't waiting any longer.

So we took the first opportunity we could and went to the courthouse in Orange County, North Carolina. Your friend Joe who was living in Wilmington, North Carolina, at the time... He had been a Marine like... I shouldn't say that. Once a Marine, always a Marine, right? He was a Marine who was no longer in the Marine Corps. He drove up from Wilmington, North Carolina, to be one of the witnesses. And if I remember correctly, your friend Brandon was gonna come up from Fort Bragg but he didn't get out of work on time before they closed for the week for the Thanksgiving break. So was it a copy repairman, I think, that we... We dragged a repairman in to be our other witness. [LAUGHTER]