

## BrainLine Interviews Robert Andrzejczak

Source: Produced by Victoria Tilney McDonough and Brian King

Video Link: <http://www.brainline.org/content/multimedia.php?id=1434>

**Robert Andrzejczak:** I've been in the Army for 3 years now and this past deployment would have been my second deployment but the first deployment was 18 months and everything went well for the most part and then this past deployment I was only there for roughly 2 months before I was hit by a grenade in Baji Iraq. The way that the attack happened was, we were driving past the market and there was a guy hanging out in the market by a chicken coop and there was another guy across the street up on top of the roof and he was the spotter. So once the spotter gave the signal the guy in the market pulled a grenade out of the chicken coop and the type of grenade it was can penetrate through a pretty good amount of steel. So he pretty much pulled the pin and ran right up to my truck and threw it and if I didn't have all of my gear on it would have been really bad but you can't cover your face really. My face was a little it was a little crispy but my like eyebrows and everything were singed off but I wasn't really too worried about that at the time.

When it happened I kind of got knocked back into my little sling that I was on and I started to black out and then it felt too easy to just go with it and plus I didn't know what would happen if I did blackout I didn't know if I would ever wake up again so I was like oh I'm not gonna chance that. So I actually came to and got myself out of my harness and everything. I tried crawling, I heard my driver he was yelling that he was hit so I thought he was hit a lot worse than I was and he only had a little a few pieces of shrapnel in him which I was pretty upset later on because I didn't tell anybody that I was in a lot of pain because I was taking the pain pretty well I think and probably more shock than anything but my driver was kind of freaking out and I didn't hear anybody in the back. I didn't hear anybody yelling or screaming or anything so that kind of freaked me out and that's why I did what I, I got out of the harness as fast as I could and even with my leg mangled I crawled to the back of the truck to see how they were doing. When I got back there they were telling me no, no, no just lay there.

Looking back on it I'm kind of surprised I made it that far before I actually started getting assistance from anybody. But they opened up the back of the back doors and let all of the smoke out and that's when my guys that were in the back of the truck everybody in my truck ended up getting hit with shrapnel so everybody was injured but my guys in the back of the truck that I was trying to help, they actually ended up helping me out and they're the reason why I'm here right now.

I was blown-up on January 7th and then I got to Walter Reed on the 9th and then from the 9th up until February 5th I think was when I was actually an inpatient at Walter Reed and at that point I was for the first like 2 weeks I had surgery every other day where they'd go in and wash out my knee and it was every other day they'd have to cut up higher and higher. It was originally a below the knee but with infection and everything they ended up having to go above the knee which at the time I wasn't thinking about it and I was like OK well do whatever you gotta do. But now looking back I know they didn't have a choice they had to go above the

knee to end up stopping the infection from spreading anymore but below the knee would have been a lot easier to work with than what I have now.

My first day I walked was my first day of physical therapy and Oprah just happened to be visiting that day and I wasn't it was Oprah I wasn't overly excited about meeting Oprah. I mean yeah it's cool to meet different people like that but I don't know it just wasn't really doing it for me and then especially being on the meds I really, I just wanted to go to physical therapy and do what I had to do and then pretty much go back to my room. Getting up and walking for the first time was it was really kind of I guess inspiring. I didn't think it would go as fast as it did. As soon as I got my prosthetic up and walking was I mean as soon as I got it I started walking and I haven't had really any problems from there. When were you first tested for traumatic brain injury?

When I first got there they were actually I was still in Germany when they first started testing me for that (traumatic brain injury). They were asking me, well they would give me a list of words to memorize. It was just 5 simple words, too easy and then she'd be like ok, just remember them and I was like alright, not thinking anything of it and then we talked for probably about 5 minutes and then when she was done talking to me and then my nurse was alright well what are the 5 words that I told you? And at that point I had no clue so right there that was kind of a given that I had something wrong and then when I did go to Walter Reed they did the same things and then I just had a really hard time with short term memory, I had a real hard time with that and it's slowly but surely getting better. I mean the meds didn't help either. So I had the TBI plus the meds on top of it.

For a little while they just kind of let it heal on its own I guess and I didn't really have too many appointments with the TBI clinic there. They were waiting for me to come off of all my heavy meds before they did any testing. That way they would know whether or not it was the meds or the actual TBI and it was the TBI but in that short amount of time, I guess it did heal enough to the point where I'm doing a lot better. I'm able to remember a lot more. I do still have short term memory (problems) pretty bad but it's not as frustrating as it used to be.

One of the good things that Walter Reed does is they provide you if you have anything if you have a TBI and if you have short term memory loss or anything like that they provide you with a PDA. So I ended up just getting my a new iPhone and I've been using that and been scheduling all my appointments with that and then there's also other applications that you can get for that and they have like 1 application as far as all your medications you can put all of that into your phone and that way you know what you took, what you took for the day and what you haven't taken for the day so that's been a real big help as far as remembering everything.

It sounds weird but yeah I was injured and I did suffer a mild TBI and I did lose my left leg but I'm able, I've met people that I've only seen on TV. I've been given the ability now to do things that Walter Reed they provide trips to everywhere and at the end of this month (February 2009) I'm actually going snowboarding in New Hampshire.

For any of the new guys that have suffered anything like this over there or anything at all you just gotta, you can't be down about it. I mean it happened, you can't change it. You just got to keep your head up and kind of blow it off, brush it off your shoulder and keep charging ahead and there will be some days where it gets a little rough but its only one day and the next day is always better.