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Back home in Worthington, injured soldier rises to new challenges

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WORTHINGTON - Army Sgt. Peter John Rooney III said his second deployment to Iraq two years after his first had "a different feel" to it. Iraqi people didn't welcome U.S. soldiers in 2006 the way they did in 2004; the desert was more dangerous, and instead of leaving with a sense of fulfillment for his accomplishments, Rooney's tour ended with him in intense pain from life-changing injuries.

In some ways Rooney's story is not that unusual. Now 26, Rooney knew he wanted to join the Army at an early age. High school bored him and college didn't appeal to him just yet. His grandfather, Harry Lynn, had regaled him with tales of the Germans' hospitality when he was stationed in Germany during the post-World War II reconstruction. Those family stories combined with what he saw as an opportunity to see the world motivated him to join the military when he was just 18.

He took the military entry test in June 2001. He chose the 1st Infantry Division of the United States Army at age 18 and headed to Georgia for basic training. Joining up in peacetime, he had no idea then that he would soon go to war, following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks which he said shocked and angered him.

"I felt I was pretty well positioned for the feelings I had," Rooney said. Following in his grandfather's footsteps, Rooney left Georgia for Germany in December 2001.

After two years of training in Europe - mostly in Germany - Rooney said he looked forward to his first deployment to Iraq in 2004. "Honestly, I was ready for it at that point," he said.

From Feb. 14, 2004, to May 17, 2005, Rooney said he saw his duty as "about curing the population and helping their everyday needs." He assisted Iraqi people who didn't have electricity or water. He guarded polls during the Iraqi election in 2005, witnessing the purple stamps on people's thumbs that showed they had cast their vote. The purple thumb became a symbol of democracy, as many women joyously showed off their stamps.

In those years, Rooney said, there was favorable sentiment among Iraqi civilians toward U.S. soldiers. "People were waving when we were driving by."

Fast-forward to August 2007, when Rooney learned of his second deployment to Iraq. His

CAROL LOLLIS

Tina Dawson, a physical therapy assistant, stretches Peter Rooney's legs and hips to get him ready for practicing with the training prosthetics.

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commander told his unit to look to the left and to the right.

"He said some of the men to your left won't make it," said Rooney. "It makes you look to the left of you and wonder who it's going to be."

Rooney said he remembers swearing to himself upon receiving orders that day. His unit would replace a Marine unit in Ramadi - a place he described as a "hot spot."

That time around, he said, people were not cheering and waving. "It was like people were just staring at us," he remembered.

His personal life had changed as well. He'd become engaged to a German woman he had met over a long weekend in December 2005 at The Labyrinth, a bar in Germany a few towns away from where he was stationed. The couple vacationed together in the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa, where he proposed to her, and married at a town hall in Germany in January 2007. Their honeymoon was in the Remington Lodge in Cummington, where Rooney grew up.

"We knew we had something special," said Rooney. He found life in the military had shifted in many ways.

"The second tour definitely had a different feel to it. I already had somebody I loved. That made me more cautious," he said. "The area we were sent to was a little rougher."

The tour was hard on his wife, Susanne Rooney, as well. He called her nearly every day, but wasn't allowed to tell her what was going on. She said she tried not to think about it.

"I think every wife has worries," said Susanne Rooney, 27. "You usually think he either comes back in one piece, unharmed, or he doesn't come back at all. I never expected him to lose limbs."

The injury

On April 16, 2007, Rooney lost both legs above the knee in Ramadi when the vehicle he was riding in hit a roadside bomb known as an improvised explosion device, or IED.

He is one of 31,575 troops injured in action between March 2003 and Dec. 7, 2009, according to figures from the U.S. military. Some of those troops suffered relatively minor injuries, and others, like Rooney, were much more severely hurt. Figures on the number of troops who suffered amputations are harder to come by, although Time magazine reported in June 2007 that the war had reached a tragic milestone of 500 amputees.

Rooney's injury happened at night, when he was sitting in the front passenger seat of a Humvee, which he said had more armor plating than the vehicles he rode in during his first tour in Iraq. Three other soldiers were with Rooney when the bomb went off, but he suffered the most severe injuries.

In the last vehicle in a three-vehicle convoy, Rooney said his driver used night vision instead of headlights. Dust kicked up from behind the other vehicles that led the way, he said, which interfered with his driver's view. Lagging behind, Rooney's vehicle radioed the others to ask them to slow down. His Humvee approached what appeared to be a pothole. A large IED was buried beside it. While the rest of the platoon had gone to the right of it, his vehicle went to the left and hit it, triggering an explosion.

The bomb hit the front passenger seat, Rooney's seat, hardest. It blew off parts of his legs and created a hole in his left eardrum.

"I remember my eyes closed; It felt like they were locked because I couldn't open them, but I tried," Rooney said. "Someone patted my chest to make sure I was all right. I wasn't unconscious, but I wasn't really there either."

Rooney said he continually tried to sit up while people put tourniquets on his legs to stem the flow of traumatic bleeding. He was in shock, he said, thinking how it all "came out of nowhere."

From the ground to inside the medical Humvee, Rooney endured the pain as medics stabilized him. He was flown to Alafad, Iraq, where he was treated for four days before being shipped to Landstuhl, Germany, for four more days of care. He said he doesn't remember much of those days because he was heavily medicated.

"Pain: that's the one thing I do remember," Rooney said. "Because you're still in deployment mode, all you're thinking about is your guys back in Iraq."

Meanwhile, Susanne Rooney learned of her husband's injury when his commander came to her parents' house in Germany. The time was about 8 a.m., and she was getting ready for her first day back to college in her hometown, where she studied archaeology.

She had assumed the commander showed up to go over financial aid and housing paperwork, as she was in the process of getting command sponsorship. But when he asked her formally to come inside, she said it hit her that "something bad" must have happened. And she initially thought her husband had died.

"They told me right away that Peter's vehicle was blown up and they told me exactly what his injuries were," she said. "I remember wondering if I was going to be capable of dealing with this. I thought that if this were the other way around, he would be with me, so I decided I would stay with him."

She dropped out of school and moved from Germany upon receiving the commander's news.

Indeed, when soldiers are as badly injured as Rooney was, it has lifelong implications for their loved ones, said Vicki Thomas, media relations director for the Taunton-based nonprofit organization Homes for Our Troops, which builds homes for injured veterans at no cost to the veterans.

"Young wives give new meaning to #stand by your man'," Thomas said. "Their marriage vows are being exercised. Some wives simply can't take it - they just walk away."

Peter Rooney doesn't remember much of the phone conversations he shared with his wife the first few days after his accident. He apologized for being injured. He laughed and seemed happy at times, moods that were likely side effects from the medication. At one point, he incorrectly told her he lost his arm in the explosion.

When Susanne Rooney first saw him in the hospital in Germany, she said, scars from the explosion's dirt and debris covered his face, his skin was blue, green and yellow, and he had lost a lot of weight.

"He looked pretty beat up," she said. "It was shocking. Heartbreaking."

Rehab at Walter Reed

About eight days after Rooney's injury, the couple arrived at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, where they stayed for 14 months.

Recovery began in a hospital room, where Susanne Rooney lived with Peter 24 hours a day, seven days a week for three weeks. She slept in a small pull-out chair and frequently awoke to sounds of doctors and nurses coming in and out of the room. The government paid her to take care of him, responsibilities that ranged from getting him up in the morning for his appointments to finding him food to making sure he took his pills.

Rooney's visitors at Walter Reed included his mother, Deborah Morris, who drove from Florida, his brother, Lee Rooney, of Plainfield, and others. "My whole family, if they could come, did come," he said.

When Rooney started physical therapy at Walter Reed, a therapist brought in other amputees who were doing well to show the group of newly injured veterans what kind of recovery they could look forward to. That message came a little too soon in his own recovery for Rooney to take it in.

"It was like #what happened to you is a traumatic experience, but it's not the end of the world' kind of thing," Rooney said. "I remember how I wished I died in Iraq."

The losses were overwhelming, including sports. The 2001 Wahconah Regional High School graduate played sports in high school and played softball in the Army. He also ran to keep in shape. At Walter Reed, that world turned upside down.

"I had always been an athletic person," Rooney said. "I was thinking about a person in a wheelchair that's not athletic. I couldn't imagine what it would be like."

Complicating his recovery was the need to be on painkillers, said Rooney. Though they helped his physical condition, they contributed to his depression.

"Everything was kind of bottled," he said. "When I got off pain pills, things kind of brightened for me."

The bureaucracy at Walter Reed proved most challenging for Susanne Rooney. Commanders who had no experience in combat were in charge of wounded soldiers, a factor she believes made it difficult for the injured to trust in their guidance.

"They acted like they knew what the soldiers had done, but everybody knew that they didn't," she said.

Meanwhile, Rooney was adapting slowly to his prostheses. In some ways his recovery was speedy: He left the hospital in only 22 days and headed to Mologne House, Walter Reed's dorm-style hotel for outpatients and their families. While there, Rooney faced a setback. He was diagnosed with heterotopic ossification, or HO, a condition in which abnormal bone develops in soft tissue, primarily in the region of the hip and knee joints.

"The body naturally wants to heal," said Thomas, who has worked with nearly 100 injured veterans. "It says #we need to send out bone because there was bone cut away'."

In Rooney's case, he felt pain in his left hip joint because the bone formed at weird angles, which prevented him from walking within the lining of his socket. He underwent bone radiation in July 2009 and said recently he seems to be walking pretty well, but it will take a while before he can walk long distances. He has had seven surgeries to date.

"Rehab time is constant and ongoing," Thomas said. "It can take anywhere from one year to three years to constantly going back to the VA for veterans with prosthetics. Their stumps change, so they have to get refitted and create new ones."

When Rooney got the green light last year to leave Walter Reed, he said he felt concerned about coming back to western Massachusetts because he believed the region to be anti-war and therefore anti-troops. He moved into a handicapped-accessible apartment in Williamsburg and bought an SUV because its size is convenient for storing his wheelchair.

He is eagerly awaiting a new home being built for him in Worthington, by local volunteers and the organization Homes for Our Troops, which builds handicap-accessible homes for severely injured veterans. The project kicked off this spring at the Clarion Hotel & Conference Center, where Vicki Thomas showed how volunteers in other areas came together to make life easier for injured veterans behind closed doors.

Kent Hicks, of Worthington, was one of the contractors who came out.

"It was a really wonderful gathering of like-minded folks that just felt like this is what we should be doing for our country, our community," said Hicks, who served as general contractor. "Veterans have sacrificed a lot. It's the least we can do."

A new beginning

Two years after the blast, Rooney said he's optimistic about his new life. He's handcycled in five marathons, traveled for pleasure, and kayaked, with other injured veterans. Four times a week, he drives to UMass Boston, where he is in the Veterans Upward Bound Program, for classes from 2:30 p.m. to midnight; twice a week, he goes to the VA Medical Center in Leeds to work on his core strength.

"My handicap isn't going to force me to be restricted to my bed," Rooney said. "I'm independent."

Looking back, Rooney said he believes he gained experience in the military that he could not have found anywhere else. He joined because he wanted to see a different life.

Looking ahead, Rooney plans to work for a nonprofit organization to help newly injured veterans.

"Not even 10 years ago, I was just being a kid that didn't really know what he was doing," Rooney said. "Now I'm disabled, but I have a good head on my shoulders."

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