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New Center Offers Renewed Hope for Military Amputees

By Donna Miles
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SAN ANTONIO, Texas, Feb. 4, 2005 — To their grandparents and even their parents, amputation was an ugly word that meant a lifetime of restrictions and dependence.



Army Sgt. Dustin Hill refuses to let the loss of his right hand, fingers on his left hand, his right eye, and most of an ear and his nose keep him from his passion of fishing. Hill and his mother, Liz Kelm, praise the care he is receiving at the amputee care center at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. Photo by Donna Miles

(Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

Not so for patients being treated at the amputee care center at Brooke Army Medical Center here. Most see their loss of limbs suffered in Iraq or Afghanistan as temporary setbacks as they strive to return to active lives, and in some cases, to military duty.

Army Sgt. Chris Leverkuhn is a reserve fueler who lost his leg in January 2004 near Fallujah, Iraq, after a homemade bomb and rocket-propelled grenade hit his truck. He admits that when he first saw his injuries, he thought he'd never walk again. Now on his "fourth or fifth" prosthesis, he's built himself up to running two laps around a quarter-mile track and laments that it's his left leg — the one that was saved — that's holding him back as he pushes for longer distances.

Leverkuhn leaves Feb. 9 for a five-day snowboarding trip to Sun Valley, Idaho, and said he's anxious to get back on his dirt bike back home in Lafayette, Ind.

Army Spc. Matthew Houston's left leg was shattered by a .50-caliber machine gun round in November 2003 near Samarra, Iraq. He fought valiantly to save the leg so he could resume his love of hiking, fishing and hunting.

Houston endured 20 surgeries here over the course of 14 months, having his leg pieced together with a titanium spacer and 13 rods and pins, and undergoing grueling

physical therapy five days a week. He was well on the road to recovery until infection set in. Unwilling to essentially return to Square 1 of his treatment, he finally agreed to amputation.

Despite his initial resistance, Houston said there was no keeping him down from the moment he received his first prosthetic leg. Within three weeks, he was walking down stairs, and he's now helping to teach other new amputees here how to quickly adapt to their new appendages.

"When I still had my leg on, I didn't know how my future looked," said the 22-year-old military policeman from Fort Hood, Texas. "Now there's nothing I can't do."

Houston said the new prosthesis has given him a new lease on life. He looks forward to returning to his outdoor pursuits and is considering a civilian career in law enforcement. "I'm finally 22 again instead of 80," he said.

Like Houston, Army Sgt. Dustin Hill, a National Guard air defense artilleryman from Galva, Ill., loves the outdoors. His dream is to be able to go fishing before next winter — no simple wish, considering he lost his right hand, fingers on his left hand, his right eye, and most of an ear and his nose when a suicide bomber attacked his patrol outside Baghdad last September.

After three months of treatment at the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research's Burn Center here, Hill is now concentrating on the next phase of his recovery at the amputee care center. He just started walking independently, which his mother, Liz Kelm, said gave him "an ear-to-ear grin." Now he's looking forward to receiving a myoelectric robotic prosthesis for his right hand and a new artificial eye he's been promised will match his left one perfectly. It's still unclear if Hill will be able to have another prosthesis attached to his left hand, he said.

Army Col. Robert Grantville, director of amputee services at the amputee care center that opened its doors here Jan. 14, said Leverkusen, Houston and Hill are pretty typical of the patients receiving treatment.

Most were young, active "tactical athletes" when they deployed to Southwest Asia, and they refuse to allow the loss of a limb to keep them down, he said.

Like the Defense Department's other amputee care center at Washington's Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the center at Brooke offers an extensive array of patient care for amputee patients. This includes orthopedics, physical medicine and rehabilitation, occupational therapy, physical therapy and advanced prosthetics, all designed to help patients return to full activity, Grantville said.

"We use a multidisciplinary approach to treat the person: their physical condition, their emotional and psychological condition, and their spiritual condition," he said. "Everyone involved in these soldiers' care is thinking in terms of holistic care."

Kelm, a licensed practical nurse herself whose son is a recipient of that care, praises the Brooke staff for its outpouring of support for the amputee patients.

"They have the best doctors and nurses, and everyone cares about you here," she said. "They show a level of compassion here that I just haven't seen anywhere else."

But as important as top-notch care is for patients, Grantville said the best therapy is the esprit de corps they share as they struggle together to face and overcome their situations.

"I can empathize with them, but I can't understand how they feel in the same way that another soldier going through this can," Grantville said. "In many ways, they can do as much for each other as we can do for them."

Grantville said how well patients recover from their injuries depends largely on themselves. "What the organization does is 10 to 20 percent. The rest comes from the patient's heart," he said. "All the technology and gee-whiz stuff is great, but it ultimately comes down to spirit."

Houston is the first to agree. He said he works at keeping himself motivated so he can continue to push himself forward. Helping to fuel that motivation is the anticipation of his new daughter, due later this month.

"(Recovery) is all about where the patient wants to go," Houston said. "And I want to be able to be the best dad possible to my daughter. She's my driving force."

Leverkuhn said his tendency "to look for the silver lining" in life is helping him immeasurably as he adapts to life with a prosthetic leg. "The only thing that can hinder me is my mind. A lot of the recovery process has to do with the patient's will," he said. "And the way I look at this is, it changed my body, but it didn't change me as a person."

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[Brooke Army Medical Center](#)



Army Sgt. Chris Leverkuhn leaves next week for a ski trip and is building up his strength on a running track after losing a leg in Fallujah, Iraq, in January 2004. Photo by Donna Miles



High resolution photo



Army Spc. Matthew Houston, who lost his left leg near Samarra, Iraq, said a new prosthetic leg is giving him a new lease on life as he prepares for his future and the upcoming birth of his daughter. Photo by Donna Miles



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