

One man's recovery guides clinic design

By Kelly Kennedy
STAFF WRITER

In Maj. David Rozelle's world, symbols play important roles:

A photo of his wife comforted him each night in Iraq.

The Bible with a message written inside from his father reminds him what's important.

The expert infantry badge he wears on his chest proves his worth as a soldier.

The trophies he has earned for running, swimming and biking display his capabilities.

The curved fiberglass that replaced his foot ensures he won't quit.

But the new amputee center rising slowly up behind Walter Reed Army Medical Center shows he uses his experiences to achieve more — for himself as well as his soldiers. In the space of a second,



Rozelle

Rozelle went from a cavalry commander leading a company of tightly knit buddies to a man in a hospital bed with only one foot. But it didn't take long for him to become

known as a hero who mapped the route for hundreds of amputee soldiers.

In April 2003, an anti-tank mine blew up under his Humvee and destroyed his foot.

At first, he said, he defined himself with his loss. He struggled with alcohol abuse, an addiction to painkillers and a general inability to leave his couch at the home he shared in Colorado Springs, Colo., with his wife, Kim.

The malaise didn't last long, and when asked about it, Rozelle skims over the topic and moves on to what's next.

When he wrote about his experiences in his book, "Back in Action," he started a chain reaction in other soldiers' lives.

"I was one of the first to say, 'I don't want to separate,'" from the Army, Rozelle said. "All these guys read my book and said, 'This guy's doing it; I can do it, too.'"

Since the Department of Defense determined that any service member who has lost a limb in battle may remain on active duty, 35 have chosen to do so, Rozelle said.

So he one-upped himself: He was the first amputee soldier to run the New York City marathon, and he began competing in triathlons.

For most, that would be enough. But Rozelle has always loved the stories of those who fought against the odds. As a soldier, he admired any hero who overcame difficulties to "lead men and win battles."

In 2005, he battled his demons and went back to Iraq with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment.

He was the first officer who had lost a limb to return to Iraq as a troop commander.

"I wanted to be the first in Iraq," he said. "It's just like I wanted to be the first down-range to shoot my tank in Iraq.

I'm still trying to lead from the front."

After returning from Iraq, he moved to Washington, D.C., to serve as administrator for the amputee center at Walter Reed. There, he tracks the progress of

the 500 soldiers who have lost limbs. He also spends three or four hours a day on his own training for the next challenge.

On Oct. 21, he will compete in the Ironman competition in Hawaii. In June, he finished the

Coeur d'Alene Ironman in 13:55. He said he wants to break 13 hours in Hawaii.

"I'm not unique in doing the Ironman," Rozelle said. "These [amputees] are right on my heels."

Then he laughed.

"I'm going to have to come up with some pretty dramatic firsts to keep ahead." □



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