

## Part I "ALLAH WILL BE WITH YOU"

**Part I "Allah be with you"**

**Part II "Get the hell out of my room"**

**Part III "That game's for sissies"**

**Part IV "His head was the size of a basketball"**

By **William Nack**, Special to ESPN.com

Ramon Guitard was riding shotgun in the bus when his world appeared to split in two before him, first with a violent boom, then with the searing explosion of bluish-white light and black smoke, then with the voice of the female behind him screaming in his ears.

It was Oct. 9, 2004, dusk was falling in Iraq, and the 22-year-old U.S. Army specialist and generator mechanic with the 659th Maintenance Company was riding in a convoy of vehicles heading south from Baghdad toward Kuwait. Guitard had sensed it coming. A group of U.S. soldiers manning a highway checkpoint had just warned the drivers in his convoy that they were heading for a stretch of landscape known for its mines and hidden IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, known by civilians as roadside bombs.

The insurgents had been planting 155mm artillery shells along those roads and waited for the convoys to come along, setting off the shells, electronically, with cell phones. Fifteen minutes from the checkpoint, they were tooling south when a shell went off under the bus.

"There was a massive, bright flash of light and a tremendous boom," Guitard remembers. "My ears started ringing, and ... I smelled smoke rising from underneath me and I heard the female soldier behind me screaming, 'My legs! My legs!' When I heard her screaming, I looked down at my legs, and there was a big hole in the floorboard under me and both my legs were split open like Subway sandwiches."

"HE PROBABLY SAW THAT I WAS IN CHARGE AND SET IT OFF WITH A CELL PHONE."

In the frenetic moments that ensued, rescuers took Guitard off the bus and layed him on a stretcher on the side of the road. He began yelling "I don't wanna lose my legs!" when a stranger approached and kneeled down next to him. He was an Iraqi national, a driver of one of the vehicles, and in the desert gloaming Guitard heard him say, "Do you mind if I pray for you in Arabic?"

"I don't mind," Guitard said. "I don't mind at all."

As the Iraqi prayed for him in Arabic, Guitard heard the whir of a Blackhawk medical helicopter as it settled off the side of the road. When the medics lifted Guitard and his stretcher aboard the helicopter, he heard the Arab driver conclude his prayer in English. "Allah will be with you," he said.

Michael Temchine  
Special to ESPN.com



Ramon Guitard once thought he would never walk again, but found support and hope for a life renewed at Walter Reed.

## OUTSIDE the LINES A TIME TO HEAL

On a perfect December day for skiing, Kirk Bauer took his new friends -- Joe Ramos and John Jones -- skiing down the slopes in Breckenridge, Colo. It didn't matter that Bauer had lost his left leg on the battlefield in Vietnam. That Ramos had lost his left arm below the elbow, and Jones both his legs, in Iraq. On the slopes that day, Ramos and Jones were among 58 disabled soldiers whose lives were forever altered in the line of duty. As they skied, they were shattering boundaries they once imagined they'd never be able to cross.

Tune in to **Outside The Lines at 9:30 a.m. ET Sunday** for Steve Cyphers' report on Bauer's work with Disabled Sports USA and the Wounded Warriors Project.

Guitard blacked out at the hospital in Baghdad, where surgeons amputated his right leg above the knee and lowered him into a medically induced coma. He awoke a month later, in early November, in the intensive care unit at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where surgeons later replaced his ruined left knee with a titanium rod that joins the upper to the lower leg, fusing the former knee joint in place. After spending three months in the hospital, including four weeks in intensive care, Guitard moved into living quarters at Reed with his wife, Melissa, and two young daughters, Shaunta, now 6, and Alecia, 1. It was there that he began the long, slow process of physical and mental rehabilitation.

Guitard thus became one of scores of recent Iraq War veterans, many of them in their early 20s, who have turned to sports as a way of rehabilitating themselves -- mentally, as well as physically -- after suffering life-changing injuries in the war.

"When I was in the hospital bed," Guitard recalls, "I told my wife, 'I'll never walk again. I'll never be able to do anything again.' Then I started handcycling. I went to my first race in New York with the Achilles Track Club this summer, and I did five miles in 26 minutes! That was my first race ever! I finished eighth, but it has brought new life to me."

Sports has given Guitard confidence. It has kept him mobile and active. "I'm not sitting on my butt," he says. "I'm going places."

Michael Temchine  
Special to ESPN.com



While working his upper body at Walter Reed, Guitard was preparing to clear his life's greatest hurdle.

The Achilles Track Club, which helps people with disabilities participate in mainstream athletics, hasn't been alone in recruiting disabled Iraq War vets at Walter Reed. Veterans have found another extended hand at Disabled Sports USA, an organization of 86 chapters in 35 states that also is devoted to getting people with disabilities -- war veterans or not -- involved in sports as an adventure in rehabilitation and recreation.

Kirk Bauer, executive director of Disabled Sports USA, is a Vietnam veteran who lost a leg to a hand grenade explosion in Southeast Asia, but lived to experience the healing influence of sports as he made his way back to civilian life.

"When I was in the hospital, I had lost my leg and I had that crisis to deal with: Who am I? Where am I going? What can I do?" Bauer says. "They put me through some tests and said, 'Well, we're gonna send you to school.' The thought of getting a degree and being active in four years was nice, but it meant nothing to me at that moment. I needed something right now! Something to validate me and increase my self-confidence.

"That's what sports did for me. I learned how to ski. They pushed me up a hill, turned me around and I skied down. It was the greatest high in the world."

Bauer now makes the rounds at Walter Reed and other hospitals, hoping to make contact with soldiers at the moment when they are in their beds trying to figure out "what the hell happened to their world."

"It's been turned upside down," he answers himself.

Michael Temchine  
Special to ESPN.com



Though confined to a wheelchair, Guitard found sports was never out of his reach.

Sports is a tool for rehabilitation, Bauer says, and it is a particularly effective one because it provides not only a reliable means by which to measure physical progress and achievement -- "to show the physically disabled that they can lead an active life despite the fact they have a disability," he says -- but also because the gratification from the accomplishment is nearly instant. Disabled Sports USA offers a dozen land and water sports -- from sailing, outrigger canoeing and kayaking to handcycling, golf and rock climbing -- and Bauer insists that each can be learned in next to no time.

"We can teach the basics of a sport in a day," he says. "In one day, they realize that they can do something. A sport starts right away to rebuild the self-confidence.

"That's what we're all about in the rehab process."

*William Nack, a former writer for Sports Illustrated, is a contributor to ESPN.com.*

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