

E.Z. Does It



HSB Summer Feature

Q: How's the recovery process going from that latest surgery? Everything back on schedule, back on track?

A: Yeah, it's going pretty well. It was ACL and PCL ligament reconstruction, so it's just been the soreness and immobility associated with that, but it's been going the way it should have and it's the last scheduled surgery I have. So, this should set me back on track to start getting back after it.

Q: That's good! Was this on the leg that was injured or the other leg?

A: The leg that was injured.

Q: How long do you have to stay off the prosthetic? Is there a specific timetable that you're required to stay off of it before you can start walking again?

A: It's a good six weeks from the date of surgery before I can get back on it again. So right now I'm just taking it easy and relaxing. Next week I'll be able to start trying to put range of motion and those sorts of things back into it. It'll be a little over a month before I start walking again.

Q: Where are all these surgeries taking place?

A: I'm at Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. I've been here since I first got injured almost 10 months ago.

Q: I'd like to start from the beginning. What drew you to West Point and got you into playing basketball there?

A: I never would have pictured myself as a military kind of guy. No one in my family has ever been in the military, but through basketball



Former Army assistant Jim Platt recruited Eric heavily while he was playing at Plano Senior High School in Texas.

(Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page)

I started to get recruited by Coach Crews—and it was actually Coach [Jim] Platt, who's there at Saint Louis, [that recruited me early on]. Coach Platt would call me all the time and he would come watch me play in tournaments.

Eventually, I got invited out [to West Point] to take an official visit. From the second I stepped foot on the campus, I was pretty much sold. I knew I wasn't good enough to play basketball in Europe or the D-League, so I was looking for what would set me up best during school and once I graduated and stuff too.

When it came to actual basketball programs, Coach Crews had set up an incredible program [with a] bunch of incredible guys working hard [and] doing the thing that wasn't a traditional

route, which—I don't know if it enticed me more—but it was a tight knit, close, strong-bonded group of guys. I guess that's what drew me into West Point. And, I don't know if you've ever been up there but, the tradition—just all the history



“It was a tight knit, close, strong-bonded group of guys. I guess that's what drew me to West Point.”

(Six of the seven seniors from the 2010 team | Photo: Army Men's Basketball)

you get walking around the buildings.

It's just an incredible place all around.

Q: What was Crews' pitch to you? Because I talked to him last year and the way he explained recruiting at West Point was, unlike a lot of other schools, "If Johnny's parents didn't want him going to West Point, he wasn't going to West Point."

A: I got to be the graduate assistant for a little bit after I graduated and, especially in a time of war, I can only imagine how difficult it is to convince 18-year-old kids and their parents that the military is the right place for them.

I guess it came down to a sense of purpose. Being a part of something bigger than yourself [through] serving others. That was always

one of Coach Crews' biggest things, having a serving heart and being a servant to those around you and to improve their lives as much as yours. What better place to do it than to enter in at a pretty high level and be making decisions on a daily basis that



Eric averaged 2.52 points and shot nearly 45-percent from the field over his four seasons at West Point.

(Photo: Army Athletics)

affect the country as a whole. It's a very unique place, but it's also the very best place to graduate and immediately step in and make a difference for the better, too.

Q: After you graduated from West Point, you stayed on as a graduate assistant—how many years before you were deployed overseas?

A: I graduated in May 2010 then I stuck around and was the grad assistant until February 2011. So, I was there for about seven or eight months. Then I went down to Fort Benning-Georgia and did some training—I learned to jump out of planes and walked around in the woods. Then I ended up at Fort Lewis-Washington, which is out by Seattle. I deployed out of

there, March of last year [2012] to Afghanistan and got hurt in August.

Q: The injury itself, is it something that's difficult to talk about? Have you dealt with any sort of PTSD or anything like that?

A: No, actually, I was extremely lucky in that I haven't had too many signs of PTSD. I can talk about it pretty openly if there's anything you want to know about it.

Q: I think the first question, and it's something that really sort of set me back a little bit when Crews explained how it happened, he said when the incident happened, basically, you cracked a joke when the medic came over. What was going through your mind when the accident happened and you're sitting there basically with your leg sitting next to you? How did you manage to maintain your composure?



**FORT LEWIS
TACOMA, WA**



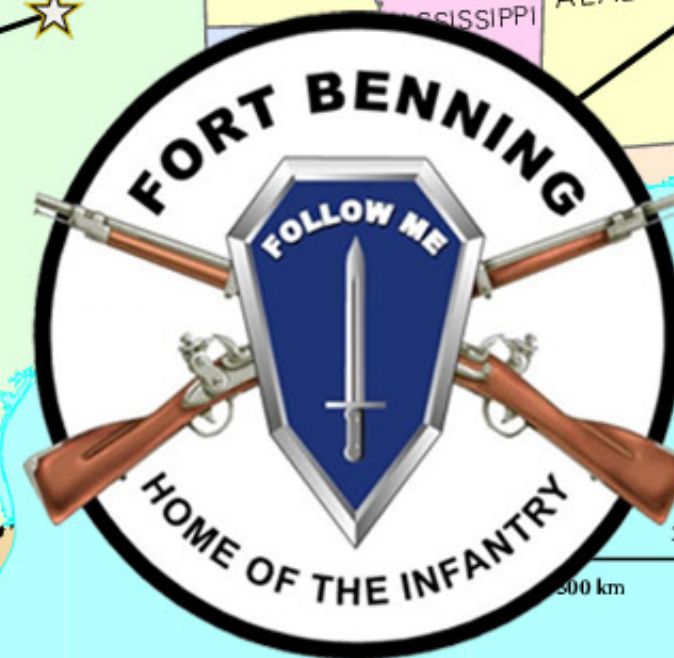
**US MILITARY ACADEMY
WEST POINT**



**ERIC'S HOMETOWN
PLANO, TX**



**WALTER REED
WASHINGTON D.C.**



HSB Summer Feature

A: (Laughs) Yeah, it's—it's kind of interesting, because I was a platoon leader, so I'm the lowest level officer, but I'm in charge of 45 enlisted guys and we're running around playing cowboys and Indians everyday. We're going after these two bad guys in a town full of bad guys and the whole plan kind of ended up going wrong.

We had to walk in there sort of alone and unafraid even though they know we're coming and we're in this back alley. There's the EOD guys, explosive ordinance disposal—they're the bomb experts like from Hurt Locker and stuff—I had three of those guys with me.

They walked across the bomb, didn't see it. Probably four or five of my guys walked across it.

I walked across it, back and forth a few times,



“When the bomb initially went off, I knew someone was hurt, *I just didn't know it was me.*”

(Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page)

and eventually set it off. The hardest part initially was the idea that I'm in charge of this huge element so I've got all these different maneuvering pieces all over this battlefield and, in an instant, I went from commanding troops that were kilometers apart to instantly just survival mode, I have to take care of myself, whatever. So, off the bat it was kind of difficult because I was trying to coordinate: Where's the helicopter going to land? What color smoke are we using? What radio frequency are we on? Stuff like that. Eventually, they just kind of yelled at me to shut up (laughs) and [told me] that they were going to handle it—I started to calm down.

It happened right after the bomb went off and everything after it was kind of, “How can I be helping someone else?” When the bomb initially went off, I knew someone was hurt, I just didn't know it was me.

You have these relationships with these guys and when something happens, all you want to do is find who's hurt and help them. I kept trying to stand up and I'd fall over and I'd stand up and I'd fall over. Then the dust settled and, uh-oh, it was me who was hurt and so they started working on me.

My medic, he's working on my leg. He's a great kid, Specialist Curt di Cristina—awesome kid—he just kind of gets worked up and his mind goes 1000 miles an hour and stuff. He told me I had to stay awake and I can't be passing out [because] then they won't know if I'm alive. He told me, “You have to stay awake. What's your full name?”

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Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page

My snipers missed a wide-open shot, which I was kind of bitter about for a little while, and then I had two javelins that both overheated so neither one of those went off. I brought an automatic grenade launcher—it's exactly what it

and I said “Thomas Eric Zastoupil” and he said, “Alright Tom, we're going to keep you alive. Don't you worry about it.” And I just looked at him and said, “Don't you ever call me by my first name.” He stopped and looked up at me for a second and I was smiling at him and it just, it calmed him down and he started doing a good job. I guess that was my way of helping the situation, because he was doing a great job, he just needed someone to calm him down a little bit. I guess that was my contribution to the situation, getting everyone calm—that was my way of showing, I'm going to be okay, let's just get out of this.

Q: Over how long of a time span is this entire thing happening? From entering the town to the bomb going off and you lying on the ground to your evacuation, how much time passed?

A: The mission kicked off and we went after these guys.

sounds like, it's the coolest thing ever—[but] the guy manning it didn't know which building to shoot at, so we put no effects on the building whatsoever.

The bad guys all got away.

We were looking to kind of blow a hole in the wall so we could walk in without having to go down a major road and it just—none of it went right. That probably took about an hour.

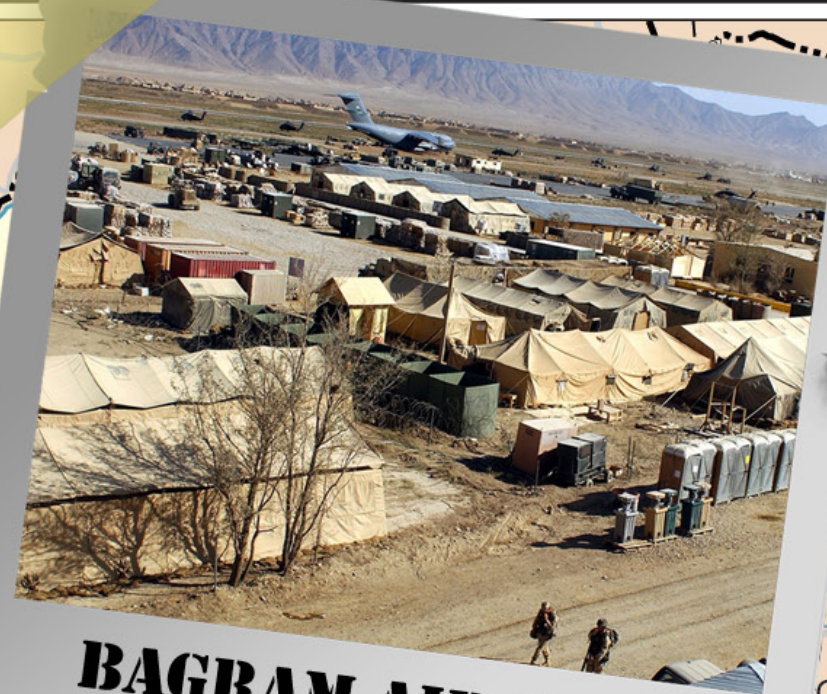
While we were in there, we were just searching for whatever intelligence we could find and we were probably in there for about 35 minutes.

It's kind of interesting because one of the things we did was, we would walk in a straight line everywhere we went—the guys in front had bomb-detecting equipment and we would walk behind them. Everyone walked in a straight line past this one tree and then one of the last guys in the line saw a wire going down and underneath

AFGHANISTAN



PANJWAI VILLAGE



BAGRAM AIR BASE



KANDAHAR AIRFIELD





“We would walk in a straight line everywhere we went... One of the last guys in the line saw a wire going down and underneath the street. We investigated it and he pulled a bomb from underneath the street that the entire formation had just walked on.”

(Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page)

the street. We investigated it and he pulled a bomb out from underneath the street that the entire formation had just walked on. It just—it wasn’t turned on. We got lucky. That kind of set the stage a little bit that, hey, we’re in the middle of it. Let’s be careful and we were as careful as could be.

None of my guys did a single thing wrong. I don’t blame anybody for it. It’s just—it can happen anytime when you’re out there just tip-toeing around the mines. When I actually stepped on it, it was about 15 minutes on the ground before the helicopter showed up and they tossed me in the helicopter. About another 15-minute ride into Kandahar airfield, which is the biggest base in the south region of Afghanistan. Then, about

five minutes in the hospital and they put me under. I woke up two days later.

Q: You mentioned feeling “bitter” towards the snipers—could you expound upon that a little bit?

A: Oh, it’s not their fault at all. I say I’m bitter because they were talking all this trash about how it was going to be an easy shot for them and all this stuff, but it’s not at all their fault that this happened. They had a wide-open shot, they just didn’t connect on it.

I don’t blame them at all, I love those

guys to death. I give them a hard time because they were talking trash about how they could use my weapon and not even zero it and all this other stuff and they’d still get the guy.

Q: So, when you’re down on the ground, are you being shot at by hostiles?

A: No, we were pretty lucky. The town had cleared out when the snipers put their rounds down on the target because they had booked it out of there before we could even get into the compound.

This was a town that I had taken contact in several times before. It’s one of those towns that you don’t walk into not expecting to get shot at. It’s just kind of understood. But, we

were kind of in a back alley and they didn’t come out messing with us once we were in there.

Q: So you wake up two days later, are you stateside or are you still over in Afghanistan?

A: I’m in a different hospital in Afghanistan—Bagram, which is the biggest probably in the country. I wake up there and there’s a couple of guys that I graduated with, a hockey player and a lacrosse player, sitting by my bedside. So, I got to see them and talk to them for a few minutes, then I fell asleep and woke up in Germany a day later, where one of my old teammates [and] a guy that I graduated with—Chris Walker and his wife—were stationed. So, I got to hang out with them for a couple days, then I made it back to the States on the 26th of August.

Q: Were you able to talk to your parents at all when you were in Germany?

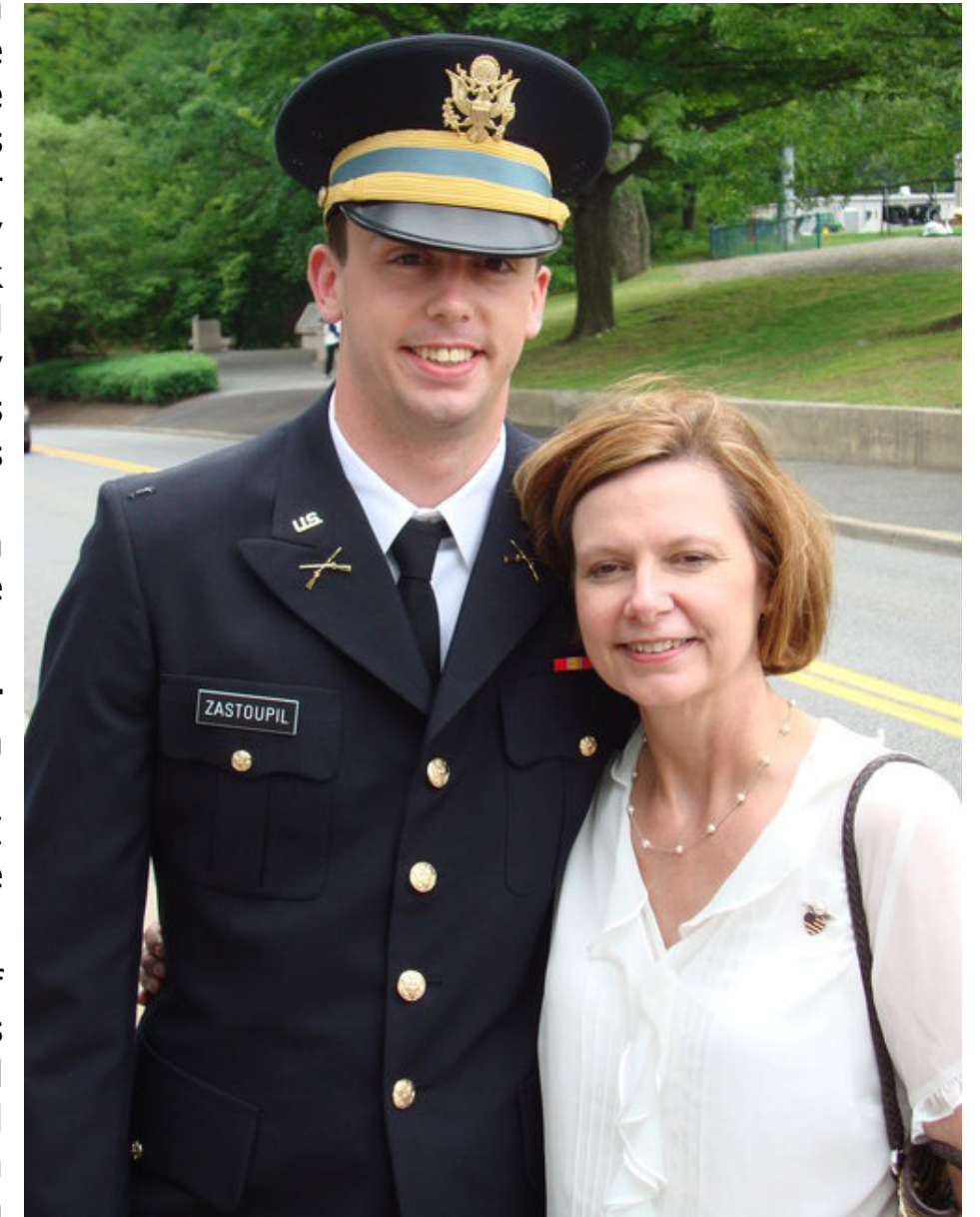
A: I think I got to talk to them when I was in Afghanistan at that bigger base in Bagram.

That’s one of those things I feel kind of bad about, because my mom gets this call that her son has been injured and it’s of the highest category of medical degrees of injury. So it went from missing a leg, to maybe missing both legs, to maybe not even going to make it, kind of deal. That bothers me a lot.

I understand why they do that, but I was sitting there on the ground, giving guys high fives on my way out, telling them I was going to be playing them in basketball when they made it back to the states and all this other stuff. I knew I was going to be just fine. It’s

just kind of like I wish that message would have been passed back to my friends and family.

Q: Who is it that’s telling your mom this and they’re doing this just as a worst-case scenario type of deal?

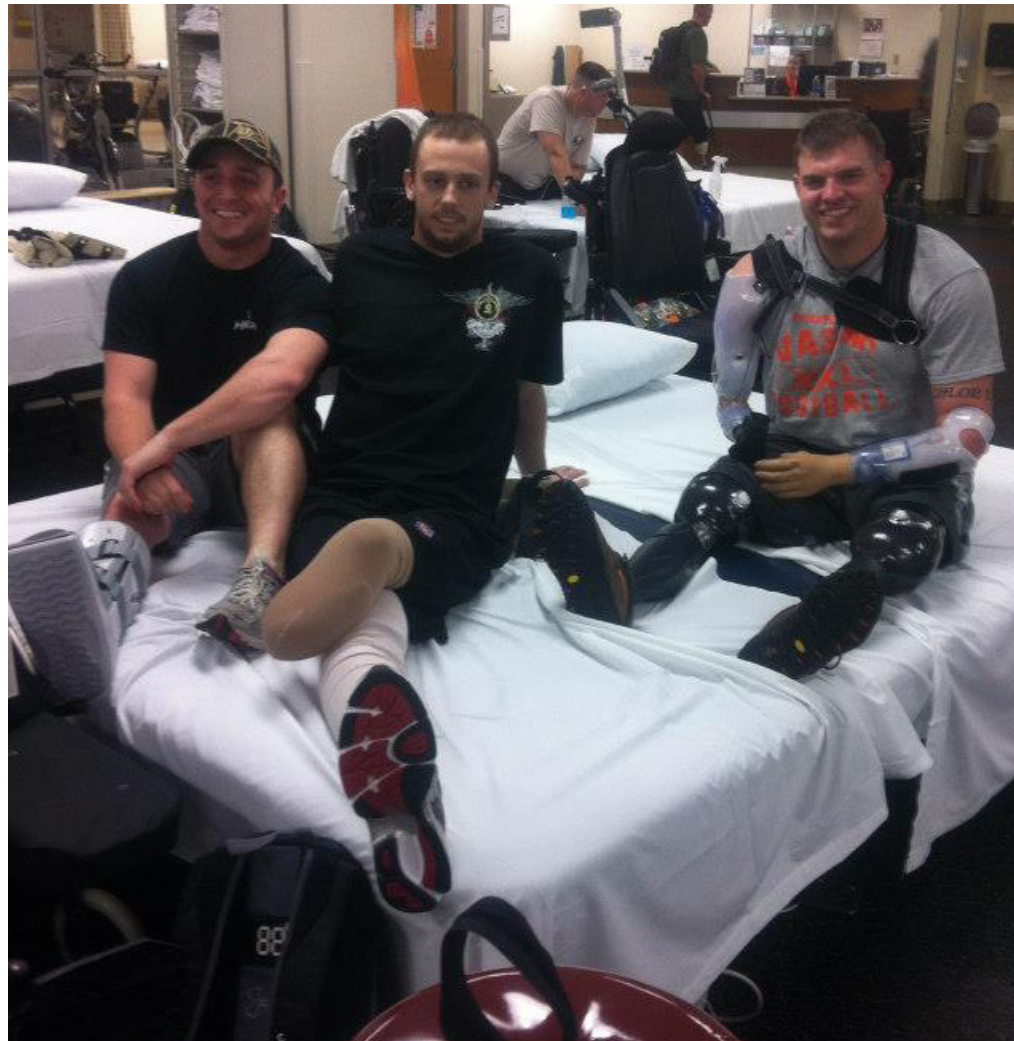


“[Updates from the military to my family] went from missing a leg, to maybe missing both legs, to maybe not even going to make it. That bothers me a lot.”

(Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page)

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A: There's actually a group of people, they're the casualty notification team and it's their job to be a liaison between family members, medical teams and chain of commands of the unit the soldier was in. They probably didn't know any better and the doctors weren't telling them anything that was going to help. So, it was kind of a bummer that everyone was sitting and waiting, not really knowing what was going to happen with my situation.



“I mean the whole place, Walter Reed in general, is first class, but the majority of the actual healing happens with the peer-to-peer relationships... Just spending time with other dudes in the same situation...sharing similar struggles—that's what really helps.”

(Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page)

Q: You come back home, is it immediately surgeries, one right after another?

A: I made it back on the 26th and I was in the ICU for about a week. It was just constant surgeries and they were all cleaning out the wounds.

Afghanistan is a dirty place. If I were to drink a glass of the water they drink, I'd be in the hospital for months. So, they really want to clean out and make sure there's no fungus or anything. I went straight into almost daily surgeries that were just cleaning out wounds.

Q: After you go through those surgeries, how long was it before you were discharged from the hospital and able to try and get back to some semblance of a regular life?

A: I was in the ICU for about a week and then in the in-patient for probably close to a month. It was the end of September when I got released from the hospital and they have this really nice out-patient housing across the street—it's essentially just an apartment building. Everything's handicap accessible, they have a room for me and a room for whoever my caregiver was—it was my mom for the first five or six months when I got hurt—and then a kitchen, a living room, a computer and TVs. So, it was a great set up and it was designed to, exactly what you said, get back to as normal of a life as you can lead. But it's also set up to teach you how to navigate with your wheelchair and how to shower sitting down where you have to transition from wheelchair to a shower-chair and stuff. It's a great

place of learning and it's a building full of amputees and people with concussions or other injuries, so everyone's kind of figuring it out at the same time and picking up tricks from their next-door neighbor.

Q: That has to provide a great support system for you guys as you work your way back as well.

A: Absolutely. I mean this whole place, Walter Reed in general, is first class—medicinally, medically, therapy, facilities, the doctors, everything. But the majority of the actual healing happens with peer-to-peer relationships.

They have a gym that's strictly for amputees and it has all this adaptive equipment and just spending time down there with other dudes that have been in the same situation, just talking with them about how they drive around or where they were when it happened or just sharing similar struggles—that's really what helps the most.

Q: So, with the prosthetic, how long was it before you were able to get on the prosthetic?

A: It was October when I got to stand up and walk around a little bit. It's all up to the doctors and when they decide you're going to be weight bearing. Different injuries obviously have different levels of complexity tied into them, but mine, this is like the only place in the world, I

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President Barack Obama visited Eric at Walter Reed last September and invited him to shoot hoops with him at the White House once he's made a full recovery.

(Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page)

guess, where my injury is considered minor.

My nickname down in the chain is “Paper cut” because it's a left leg below the knee injury. If you were missing anything, this is ideal as it gets. So, I got up and I was moving around pretty quickly. I want to say six weeks to the day I got out of the hospital I was walking around.

I mean it is [minor]. When I put that leg on, it feels minor because all it really is—it's just a cup with a stick on the end that's got a big foot on it. There's no mechanical knee to it, there's no moving complex pieces. It's just like having a stiff ankle and working with that. It really isn't that hard to get the hang of. I probably crutched with my new leg for a few days and used a cane for a few days, but I was walking around on my own pretty quickly.

Q: How quickly are you able to start running? Does that come just as easily or does it take more time?

A: I actually haven't been able to start running yet. That was dependent on this past knee

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Photo:
Team EZ Support
Facebook Page

surgery I just had. But there's a good six months of rehab first and that's if you're in ideal situations. They have to make sure your bone is dense enough to handle the stresses that running puts on it.

I see guys getting their running legs every month down here. It looks like that dude from South Africa, the Pistorious guy, the crazy—yeah there's different types of legs for different situations. The curved ones are for running and they have swimming legs, walking legs, hiking legs, snowboarding legs and all this crazy stuff.

Q: What do they give you for basketball?

A: I'll get one that will have a little more return when I push down on the toe. One of the main advantages to the basketball one is there's this little ball where the ankle is and it allows you to pivot a little bit. Instead of just being a rigid

ankle, you can actually turn your leg inside or outside and keep your foot still on the ground—that will help out when it comes to stop-and-go and cutting and that kind of stuff.

Q: I saw that ABC News piece that they did on you and it emphasized your connection to basketball, could you talk about how basketball has sort of driven you through this recovery process?

A: It's made a huge difference.

My mom kind of said it in that piece, but they were trying to get me to play wheelchair basketball from the second I showed up, but I've always refused to participate in that just because I know I'm going to get angry and frustrated with the level I was at versus what I would be doing there.

I'll incorporate basketball into whatever I can, whether it's ab drills or when I first got my legs I was doing balance steps or walking around dribbling a basketball—if the ball bounces all over the place, being able to shift my weight and reel it back in.

Obviously, the ultimate goal is to get back to running and jumping and playing again and stuff. I'm hoping that's what this last surgery will lead to. I've shot around a few times. I never was able to jump very high, so that's not much of a difference, but it feels good. I just needed to get this knee a little more stable before I could actually start running up and down and actually playing again.

Q: It's good to hear that everything's going pretty smoothly! Moving forward, once you've fully recovered and you're back to using the prosthetic and everything, what are your plans?

A: I was actually a computer science nerd at West Point and one of the old West Point basketball players that used to come and hang around the program and Coach Crews actually

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has an awesome relationship with is a three star general now—[LTG] Rhett Hernandez. He happens to be the commanding general of Army Cyber Command, which is just 30 minutes down the road here in DC. He's offered to bring me in and let me start working for him doing all this cyber warfare and cyber security stuff that's really taken off in the last few years.

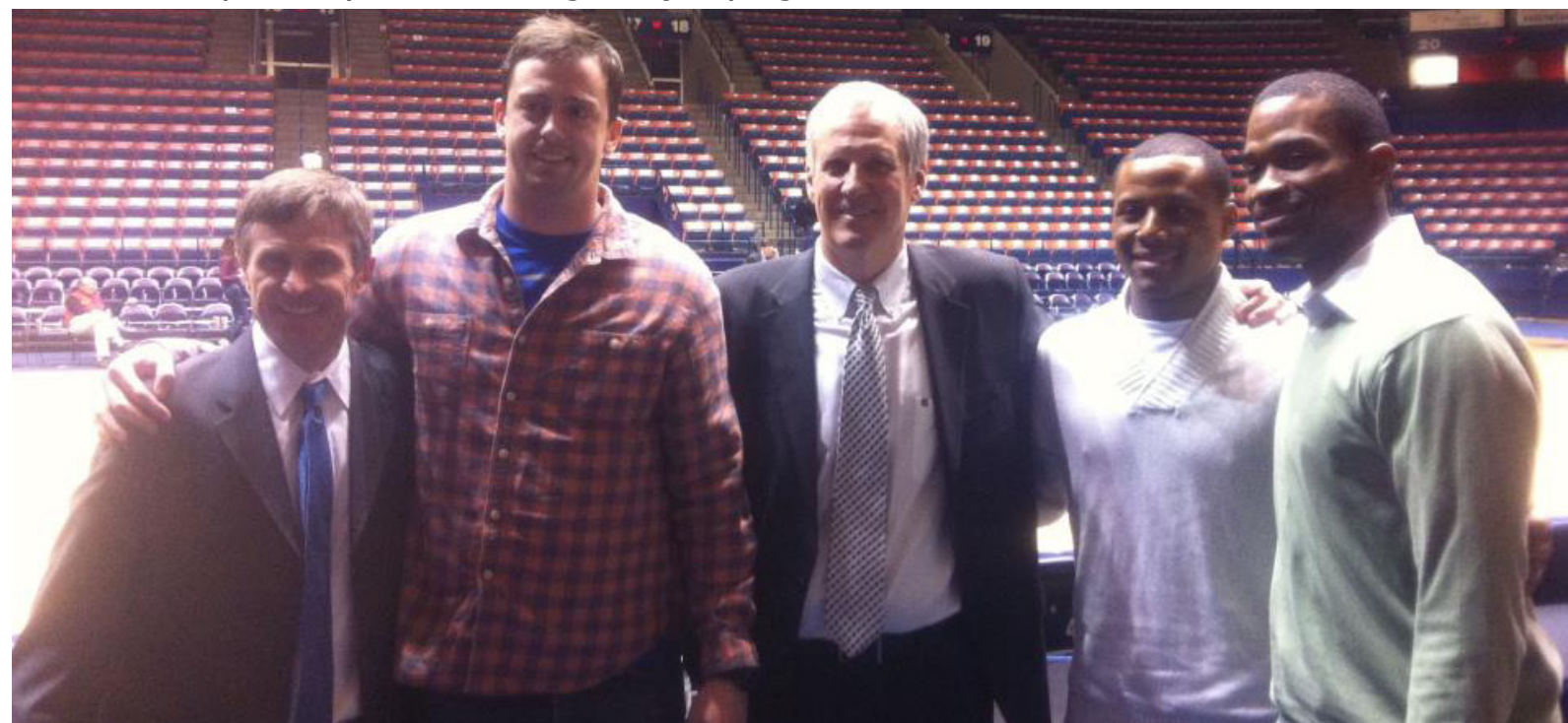
Q: Very cool. How soon would you start something like that?

A: It's down at Fort Belvoir, which also has a good hospital. It's called a warrior transition unit, which is kind of the unit I'm in now doing my rehab and stuff. They have a really good one, so I'll probably transition down there in the next five or six months once I'm back up to moving around and probably even running and jumping

and stuff. I'll finish out my recovery there and sort of ease into getting back to work.

Q: Do you ever have any regrets about choosing to go to West Point and joining the military?

A: No, absolutely not, it's an incredible, incredible process—developmental place as far as academics and leadership and just being an overall good person. I wouldn't take back a minute of it. I'm thankful to Coach Crews and Coach Platt for reaching out to me as a crazy, young high school kid with long hair. I'm glad that they brought me into it. I've loved every minute of it. It was hard and it was a challenge, but I can, without a doubt, see that I'm a better person having come out the other end.



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(Eric, along with two other West Point basketball alums, visited with Platt and Crews following SLU's game at Richmond last February. Photo: Team EZ Support Facebook Page)