

## Critical Care Packages



Photo- Susanne Larkins

Sgt. Erick Castro demonstrates part of his physical therapy regimen at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

All those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan look forward to care packages from family and friends. The care packages Sgt. Erick Castro is most grateful for were sent by people he doesn't know. He never met them face to face, but they will always be a part of him through the blood they donated as part of the Armed Services Blood Program Life Force team.

Somewhere on the road between the Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Fallujah, an element of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment came under fire.

The ambush lasted several minutes. During the firefight, the armored personnel carrier Castro was riding in was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). In an instant, the round spun him to the floor. In the heat of the fight, Castro and two other soldiers in the vehicle kept firing.

"I didn't think I got hurt that bad," he recalls. "I thought maybe I had a broken leg."

Moments later, he realized the RPG had passed through his left leg at the hip, all but severing it. What happened from that point remains a blur. He recalls being medevaced in a Black Hawk helicopter to the 28th Combat Support Hospital (CSH) south of Baghdad, where doctors had no choice but to amputate his left leg at the hip. Critical to his treatment at the 28th CSH were the transfusions Castro received to replace the blood lost since his injury.

From the 28th CSH, Castro was flown to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany for more operations to stabilize the wound.

A month after the attack, Castro found himself at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, receiving more attention and starting a lengthy regimen of physical therapy. He was fitted with a state-of-the-art prosthesis made of titanium alloys that has returned much of his mobility.

Despite the devastating injury, Castro had several things going for him. Though the RPG inflicted severe injuries on Castro and his teammates, it did not explode. Had it exploded, it would have peppered them with deadly shrapnel.

Additionally, advances in training and technology placed highly skilled medical personnel closer to the fighting, with more advanced equipment and supplies than ever before. After the attack, fellow soldiers applied their first aid training to keep Castro from losing too much blood while waiting to be medevaced. The next set of helping hands came in the form of responsive medevac units that gave Castro the initial treatment he needed to survive the "Golden Hour," a term used in medical circles that emphasizes the importance of preventing shock due to excessive blood loss in the first hour following a severe injury.

All these things were critical to Castro's survival, but the most important thing Castro had going for him may have been the generosity of his military family thousands of miles away who made sure blood was available to replace the blood he lost. These donations saved Castro's life.

"I'm thankful for that," Castro says. "I lost a lot of blood. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be here today."

The blood he received came through the Armed Services Blood Program (ASBP) thanks to its team of dedicated donors—the Life Force. The ASBP collects blood from the military community for the military community. Through their

contributions, Life Force members have saved countless lives at military medical facilities at home and around the world.

The Life Force team did not just provide blood for the facilities that stabilized Sgt. Castro. Blood provided by this elite team was delivered with precision and accuracy for each of the many surgeries he has undergone since the ambush. Castro cannot remember how many operations he has had so far. "Somewhere in the teens," he says.

Recovery from his injury has been slow, but steady. Physical therapy sessions have been difficult. At first, the simplest of tasks on his prosthesis were daunting.

"In the beginning, I would sweat just standing up," Castro recalls. Before leaving Walter Reed, his physical therapy regimen had expanded to an hour or so a day and included pushups, walking, stair climbing and more.

Castro is thankful for every day he has seen since the attack. He is also thankful for the Life Force members that help ensure blood is available when the military community needs it. He reminds those who are eligible to donate whenever they can.

"Donating is very important," he says. "Somebody might need it at any time. One pint might help a guy—maybe even save his life. If you can give, do it."

For more information on becoming a lifesaving member of the Life Force team, [contact a Blood Donor Center](#) near you.