



Then-Maj. Andrew Lourake (left) talks with Army Staff Sgt. Daniel Metzdorf (center) and Army Sgt. Maurice Craft about their progress learning to use their prosthetic legs during physical therapy. Sergeant Metzdorf, an airborne infantryman, lost his leg when his fire team was ambushed while on patrol in Iraq. Colonel Lourake talks with Airman 1st Class Anthony Pizzifred (above) about what to expect after his stitches are removed from his amputated leg. Airman Pizzifred, a security forces member from the 5th Security Forces Squadron at Minot Air Force Base, N.D., lost his leg when he stepped on a land mine while on patrol at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. Lieutenant Colonel Lourake visits with them and other amputees weekly at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C., as part of the Amputee Coalition of America's peer visitation program.

Putting His Best Foot Forward

Amputee pilot helps Airmen on road to recovery, hopes to return to cockpit

by Staff Sgt. Melanie Streeter, Air Force Print News
photos by Master Sgt. Jim Varhegyi

More than five years ago, in the woods of southern Maryland, Lt. Col. Andrew Lourake was out for a Halloween ride on his dirt bike when a throttle malfunction changed the motorcycle's direction and altered the course of his life — forever.

The resulting accident launched him 15 feet in the air and left him with a broken leg.

Because what started as a bad break that should have healed in four months turned into infection after infection and multiple surgeries — 18 in three and a half years, including two total knee replacements — he knew it was decision time.

"I decided to just call it quits and cut it off," said the former C-5 Galaxy and special air missions pilot stationed at Andrews Air Force Base, Md. "I had a lot of time to research prosthetics while I was thinking about it, and there have been some wonderful innovations in the past 10 years. So I just decided that cutting it off would be easier than living with a leg that didn't work very well."

Doctors removed Colonel Lourake's left leg, above the knee, in June 2002. From that time on, his journey to recovery took him many places. First, there was a prosthetist in Northern Virginia, where he was fitted with a high-tech Otto Bock C-leg; then to the Aeromedical Con-

Colonel Lourake applies talc to his C-leg microprocessor-controlled knee-shin system before fitting it in place after a physical therapy session at Malcolm Grow Medical Center, Andrews Air Force Base, Va. His prosthetic leg features a microprocessor swing and stance phase control. Its customized settings and constant readjustments provide a secure, natural and efficient gate at varying walking speeds and over uneven terrain. He was one of the first military members fitted with the leg, and because of his positive experiences, the C-leg has become the leg of choice for other military members.



sult Service at Brooks City-Base in San Antonio, where doctors tested his physical abilities and overall physical condition. Finally he arrived at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., not as a patient but as a mentor, where the experience he gained helps his military brethren recover from combat wounds.

A desire to help

"One of the doctors at Walter Reed knew we were going to be in a war and that we were going to have injured coming back, and some of them would have loss of limbs," Colonel Lourake said.

So Army Lt. Col. (Dr.) Jeff Gambel set up a peer visitation program, working with the Amputee Coalition of America to train volunteers. Volunteers go to the medical center and talk to those returning from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom with limb loss.

"I'm not really quite sure what is easier — having a traumatic injury where your leg is gone right away, and then you have to deal with it, or having to actually make the decision on your own," Colonel Lourake said. "These

guys don't have a choice. They either had it blown off, shot off or it had to be removed in one way or another. They didn't have the ability to research [amputation] like I did. So that's where I come in. I can tell them essentially what to expect, what life's like, and be an example for when they get out of here."

For one Airman, the colonel's quest to return to flight is what solidified his resolve.

"I was determined to stay in the Air Force," Airman 1st Class Anthony Pizzifred said. "When Colonel Lourake came to visit me here, he gave me the push. This is going to happen."

Airman Pizzifred, a security forces member from the 5th Security Forces Squadron, Minot Air Force Base, N.D., was on patrol at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, when he stepped on a land mine. The resulting injuries led to the amputation of his left leg below the knee.

Another Airman at Walter Reed is just as determined as Airman Pizzifred to return to duty.

"I want to stay in the Air Force," said Airman 1st Class Scott Palomino, a surveillance technician from the 603rd Air Control Squadron, Aviano Air Base, Italy.

A mortar round exploded in his tent at Balad Air Base, Iraq, sending shrapnel through his left foot. After initial surgery, he was sent to Landstuhl, Germany, and then to Andrews Air Force

Base, Md., where several Air Force members greeted him. One of them was Colonel Lourake.

"When I came in on the plane, I was on a stretcher," Airman Palomino said. "I was kind of scared because you're in constant transport, on your back, and all you can see is the ceiling of the airplane.

"So when we landed, a bunch of Air Force people came to greet me," he continued. "Colonel Lourake said 'hello' and 'thank you.' Then he said, 'Don't worry; it'll be OK. I know.' The way he said it made me wonder. Then he lifted his pants, and I saw he had a prosthetic."

Just knowing another Airman had faced the issue and was still on duty set a lot of his worries at ease.

Healing help

While Colonel Lourake helps the amputees on their road to recovery, his wife helps their spouses.

"We talk about the more intimate things that a lot of them want to ask, but don't know who to ask," Lisa Lourake said. "We become friends, and they're able to ask me all [kinds of] questions."

Having her by his side makes the visits more credible, Colonel Lourake said, since many young men worry about losing their wives or girlfriends or about whether or not they can find someone to marry someday.

"Bringing her along with me just solidifies that life is normal and that you can pretty much do anything you want to. There's no holding back."

If his waiver request is approved, only one thing could hold Colonel Lourake back from the pilot's seat.

"[Visiting Walter Reed] is the most important and meaningful thing I have ever done in my life," the colonel said. "If I was given the choice to go fly somewhere and have to leave Andrews, or stay here and be able to continue what's happening with us going to Walter Reed, I'd probably turn down the assignment.

"It's just more important for me to give back," he said.

Giving back helped put the accident and its aftermath in perspective for Mrs. Lourake.

"Throughout this entire ordeal, we kept wondering how much more are you going to throw our way? How many more surgeries? How many more infections? How much more bad news are we going to get," she said. "Because we felt like we were good people; we didn't do anything wrong.

"But one day I realized, it's a gift," she continued. "I know I feel that way, and I think he does too. With this amputation he's able to help so many people because he's such a positive, outgoing person. And we're able to change lives at Walter Reed just by giving them an example to live by."



Colonel Lourake tests his prosthetic leg in a CV-22 Osprey manned flight simulator at Patuxent River Naval Air Station, Md. He hopes to return to the cockpit, but said if his waiver is approved and he had to choose between leaving the Washington, D.C., area to fly and staying near Walter Reed to help other amputees, he'd probably choose the latter.

After an evaluation by a board of physicians and a functional ability check in a C-37 simulator, the evaluator and flight surgeon determined Colonel Lourake met or exceeded all standards of airplane control in emergency and abnormal situations. Those results are being forwarded through his wing commander to the Air Force surgeon general who will make a recommendation to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John Jumper on whether he'll be allowed to return to the cockpit.

Regardless of the outcome of his waiver package, he said he wouldn't change a thing about his experiences. "Except maybe all the pain," he said. "It's a tough thing to say when I sit back and reflect on the tough times Lisa and I went through. It really was rough. But out of tragedy comes something good. It's strange how life turns out sometimes." ☺

Editor's note: As this issue went to press, Colonel Lourake's waiver package to return to the cockpit was still being routed through the approval process. His wing commander has sent it to the Air Force surgeon general who will decide if it'll be forwarded to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John Jumper for final approval. Each waiver request is evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and there's no guarantee his will be approved.