

New Braintree veteran, artist to march in NYC parade

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Staff Sgt. William Kleinedler of New Braintree, who was severely burned in Iraq in 2006 when the truck he was driving was blown up by an IED, is an accomplished artist. He will march in New York City's America's Parade today. (T&G STAFF/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

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Today, Veterans Day, U.S. Army Staff Sgt. (retired) William R. Kleinedler of New Braintree will walk up Fifth Avenue in New York City's America's Parade.

Sgt. Kleinedler will represent Operation Mend, a joint venture between Ronald Reagan UCLA

Medical Center in Los Angeles, the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, and the Veterans Affairs-Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, which provides access to reconstructive surgery services for service members wounded in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The 48-year-old staff sergeant, who retired from the Army in 2009 after 15 years' service, was badly injured in October 2006 when the truck he was driving from a medical mission in Tarmiyah, Iraq, was blown up by an improvised explosive device. He suffered second- and third-degree burns on his face, arms and hands.

But he was lucky: Three of the four other people in his truck died.

For Sgt. Kleinedler, the parade will be a chance to walk with those who have sacrificed for their country and raise awareness of the critical work the reconstructive teams do to heal soldiers who have suffered severe injuries.

It will give the public an opportunity to thank their wounded warriors and support morale.

And it may offer hope to others who struggle with life-changing injury or illness.

"Oct. 17, 2006, was the first day of the rest of my life," Sgt. Kleinedler said. "I didn't die. I was given life."

Since that fateful day, and the dozens of surgeries that followed over months and years, Sgt. Kleinedler also has turned to his artwork, which he now pursues full time, to share the beauty and inspiration he sees in the world.

He said, "Everything beyond that point became immensely beautiful because I was alive."

Sgt. Kleinedler has received several commissions for his work, including an 18-foot metal butterfly sculpture called "Hope," which swirls up a fieldstone chimney in the lobby of the Warrior and Family Support Center at Fort Sam Houston in Texas, and a steel-and-copper sculpture completed with students from Worcester Technical High School in 2012, called "Integro," which stands at the Fisher House at the VA Boston Healthcare Medical facility in Boston.

"I've been given this life again. I'm not going to waste it," he said. "I'm hoping to do something with my art, just to inspire them to keep going."

Sgt. Kleinedler had no idea what turn his life would take in December 2005, when he was called to serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

A single man living in Spencer at the time, who owned an architectural design and finishing business and sold a few drawings on the side, Sgt. Kleinedler was on inactive ready-reserve status with the Army.

He reported to Fort Jackson, S.C., in January 2006 and then to Fort Bragg, N.C.

Having previously served as a supply sergeant, Sgt. Kleinedler was given a crash course at Fort Dix, N.J., to become a civil affairs officer.

"Our main job was to teach the Iraqi people basically how to take over their country again," he said.

His team worked with the Iraqi people to build fresh water supplies, carry out building projects, clean up the rubble, develop infrastructure and regain their police force.

"It was a nonstop project. No sooner would we build something than the insurgents would blow it up," Sgt. Kleinedler said. "It was also difficult because the Iraqi people didn't want to be out there because they feared for their security. It was difficult just raising a crew to go out and work."

Sgt. Kleinedler's voice softened as he described his Iraq experience. The peaceful setting in his New Braintree living room where he talked evoked a stark contrast with his poignant war-zone story. His 2-year-old daughter, Emerson, played nearby and his wife, Jenny, whom he married after he came home, homeschooled 9-year-old Lainey in the dining room.

"There were so many conflicting emotions," he said. "Just being in a new country was so exciting. ... The biblical history in that area is just huge. At the same time, how devastating is their standard of living. It was so inhumane how they were living. These are people you're trying to help. They don't have anything."

An Iraqi boy who Sgt. Kleinedler handed a new soccer ball had tears of gratitude because he hadn't been given anything like that before.

"You wanted to help so much, but at the same time, you had to watch your back," he said.

On Oct. 16, 2006, the day before his truck was hit, Sgt. Kleinedler woke up with a gut-wrenching, sickening feeling about the medical mission that was originally planned for that day.

Everything went wrong as the team set up the trucks and prepared to head out. By noon, the team leader scrapped the day's mission.

The next day, the crew began again and things started off well.

The troops convoyed to Tarmiyah, cordoned off a clinic, and with medical staff provided free health care services to about 200 local people, mostly women and children.

As the convoy headed back, Sgt. Kleinedler maneuvered a Humvee between obstacles that littered the road.

"Just as I got to a point between the two crater holes, I saw freshly tamped asphalt," he said.

"I saw it just as it went under my front bumper... As soon as it went under the truck, they detonated it."

His truck was lifted off the ground and bent in half. The interior was engulfed in rolling flames, with smoke so thick Sgt. Kleinedler couldn't see out the windshield. He held his breath and tried to open the door, but it was jammed shut.

Sgt. Kleinedler saw a brilliant white sphere floating between his chest and the steering wheel and thought the sphere was phosphorus, which burns extremely hot.

"I just knew this was the end of my life. But it didn't land on me," he continued. "Then a voice came to me very clearly: 'You need to get out of the truck.' "

The voice repeated a few times and then said: "You don't have much time left."

Sgt. Kleinedler gave a final shove to the door and it popped open, sending him rolling onto the road and into a ditch.

"The entire event probably lasted 15 seconds, but it felt like it lasted forever," he said.

Sgt. Kleinedler saw U.S. troops approaching, who cut off his burned clothes and took him to a landing zone where he could be airlifted.

The next time Sgt. Kleinedler opened his eyes he was in a MASH unit in Baghdad. He was then flown to an Army base in Germany and the next day, to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

There he received burn treatment and grafting, starting with bulk reconstruction. His arms, hands and face were badly burned. His nose had melted and needed to be rebuilt with cartilage from his ear and other material.

When he was selected for Operation Mend at UCLA, he was able to receive fine-tuning to clean up the scar tissue to make it less noticeable on his face, and to have more work on his nose to keep the air passage open. Work is still being done.

"My nose and mouth work, but not completely," he said.

Grasping a pencil and beginning to sketch again was part of Sgt. Kleinedler's rehabilitation.

This June, Sgt. Kleinedler completed a graphite, watercolor and ink drawing called "Inbound," which he said was about all veterans coming home.

The artwork shows a bald eagle in flight, about to land on a branch. The background is

hazy, like the experience of fighting understood only by other soldiers. Three dead trees stand in memory of the troops killed in Sgt. Kleinedler's truck.

It's a hauntingly beautiful scene, but one that reflects the warrior's reclaiming life at home.

Sgt. Kleinedler said, "When you get that close to death, you really appreciate life."

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