

The Trials of Israel Del Toro

by Frederick Wickert

Just how much is one man expected to endure? Follow the story of Israel Del Toro, and you will know what I mean.

His trials began in 1988 when his father, from Mexico, died from a heart attack. In 1989, a drunk driver killed his mother, who was from Texas. Being the oldest of four children, Israel, a teenager became the provider for the family and with his grand parents in New Lenox, Illinois helped put his siblings through Catholic school. He had promised his father before he died, that he was always going to take care of his brother and sisters.

By the age of 22, with a college stint behind him, Israel was working in an ammonia plant. He believed his factory job was getting him nowhere. His brother and sister were now old enough to take care of themselves. Seeing an Air force recruiting ad, and then an attractive female recruiter, he joined the Air Force.

Israel went from basic training, to technical training, and then to jump school. The Air Force was looking for people with JTAC potential. JTAC stands for joint terminal attack controller. They are the ones who go into forward combat positions on the ground and direct aircraft for attacks on enemy targets. Israel went for it and loved the job.

He was sent to Bosnia and pulled a tour of duty there. He returned around Thanksgiving in 2000, and lost a cousin, who had been like a brother to him. He didn't want to be around all the sadness, so he went to his fathers hometown in a tiny village in Mexico, to visit his grandparents.

While in Mexico, a cousins wife introduced him to a friend of hers, named Carman. He was hooked. They made plans to stay in touch when he returned to duty, but he could not escape the sadness he had tried to avoid in Chicago. After he and an ill uncle had a few beers together, the uncle died before he could get back on the plane for the States. He didn't know the uncle wasn't supposed to drink.

Death nearly came to him in Iraq. He was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division on suicide missions. The Iraqi shelling was so bad that that only two out of five scheduled AC-130 gun ships were able to land with his guidance. He and Carman had been married only two years and his son Israel Jr. was only a year old. It was 2003.

Israel returned from Iraq unscathed. It was not long before he was on his way again. This time to Afghanistan, where he was assigned to work with the 4th Air Support Operations Group under Army Lt. Col. Wayne Canipe.

On a chilly morning, North of Kabul Air Force Staff Sergeant Israel Del Toro was with a group of scouts under the command of Army Lt. Brian Findley. For three days they had been trailing a group of Taliban fighters, and watched for them by night. Hours later, after eating lunch with Afghan National Army allies, they crossed a creek. His humvee tire rolled over a buried pressure plate mine. On fire, he crawled into the dirt. Then, limping on Lt. Findley's arm sank into the nearby stream to cool his seared body. Amidst the explosions of ammo stashed in the burning humvee, he struggled to utter the code words to call in airlift medics on radio equipment half burned.

From there he was in and out of consciousness. He remembers Lt. Findley talking to him to keep him awake during the helicopter ride. He remembers the doctor in the hospital cutting off his favorite watch. Then knew nothing for the next three months. The bomb blast had taken his face, his hands and his career as an elite JTAC, calling in tactical jet strikes.

He awoke in intensive care in the burn treatment unit of Brooke Army medical Center in San Antonio. Burns covered 80 percent of his body. His wife was there and he wanted to hug her, but Carman was only able to squeeze a toe. She told him president Bush had been there to see him. Dressed in medical gloves and

booties, stayed with him for about twenty minutes, thanking him for his valor. Israel remembered none of it.

Defying the prognosis of the doctors, he left the hospital in May of 2006. He was on his two feet a month later. At a ceremony in San Antonio, more than 200 pilots, family members and Airman watched him slowly walk on stage where General Mosley, Air Force chief of Staff awarded him the Purple Heart. General Mosley returned in February of 2007 to promote him to technical sergeant. General Mosley told him, "You represent everything that's good about the Air Force."

His recovery is beating all of the odds and medical professionals and physical trainers are amazed at the pace And extent of his recovery. He lost his face, one hand and most of the fingers of the other hand. His vision in both eyes has been weakened.

Now Israel Del Toro has to fight another battle. He loves the Air Force and wants to continue his fifteen-year career with the Air Force. He is working desperately toward that goal, but he is doing so at a time when the Air Force has to decrease its force by 40,000 personnel. He believes his best chance will be in training new JTAC's. General Mosley told him he had a story to tell, and urged him to tell it. He has been speaking to large groups and telling them his story.

Each time he speaks, his voice improves and his confidence grows. The sizes of the groups get larger and more enthusiastic. Perhaps his speaking before large groups of people about his experiences will become useful to the Air Force and pave the way for him to continue a career in the Air Force. It will be about a year before an evaluation board makes the final decision. He could use your prayers for his future. He has paid a high price. I hope it will be enough.

JULY 17, 2007 - UPDATE

After seeing the story of Israel Del Toro, Tech. Sgt. Charles K. Miller stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio wrote:

I was the recipient of a Command level award earlier this year and, needless to say, it stands as a career highlight. But after reading Tech. Sgt. Israel del Toro's incredible story, I can honestly say that meeting him and his family would be the absolute pinnacle of my 19-plus years. Thank you, "D.T.," and I know you have heard it before, but you are a true hero.