

Bright

[Justin Constantine ('92)]

A real American hero

BY CAPT. JEFFREY CRETZ ('03)

The singular pull of the sniper's trigger changed one hero's life forever. In that moment, time stood still. The date was Oct. 18, 2006.

U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Major Justin Constantine ('92) was shot six weeks after being deployed to Iraq. He has since turned wounds into triumph, and he helps other veterans do the same.

Many of Constantine's memories about his injury are still blurry. He knows the bullet entered behind his left ear and exited from his mouth, causing catastrophic damage. He knows he is alive because a Navy corpsman provided rescue breathing and performed an emergency tracheotomy while under enemy fire.

During the first week of his recuperation period at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, Constantine's head and throat were so swollen that he had to communicate by writing. He remembers writing a note to his girlfriend Dahlia, "Hey, we're in Germany. We've never been here together, we should go out and do something," oblivious to the severity of his injuries.

Gradually, he began to realize the serious nature of his wounds as he noticed the extent to which medical personnel, his mother and girlfriend went to ensure he did not see his reflection in mirrors and windows. They taped get-well cards over reflective surfaces.

Constantine's actions since his injury embody the philosophy of the ancient Chinese proverb: "Better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." Since returning to the states, Constantine has dedicated his professional life to helping wounded veterans as they return home. "Unfortunately, it seems like many wounded warriors have bad stories about their care. Although I received some amazing care along the way, I also was very frustrated at certain points."

The damage caused to his face brought many inquiring stares from onlookers. Constantine and Dahlia, now his wife, discussed the matter. As a way to help answer unasked questions, he designed a T-shirt with the phrase "Iraq and Back."

When he wore his T-shirt, people began approaching him and asking about his experiences. Constantine realized he had created an opportunity for Americans to express their gratitude for the sacrifices

made by the members of the armed forces. He sold the shirts on his website www.iraqandback.com, but has since updated his idea. Now he offers the T-Shirts for Troops program. For every \$10 tax-deductible donation, a T-shirt is sent to a wounded warrior at the Brooke

Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. His goal is to send 3,500 T-shirts, and he's close; he has sent more than 2,000.

Constantine is still recovering. He has more planned surgeries. Recovery after such an injury is a piecemeal process — one that has come with upsides he says. "I married an amazing woman, have met tons of great people, and I'm doing a lot for wounded warriors that I wouldn't have been doing otherwise. I've created two businesses, both related to my injury and both to help other veterans."

Constantine says a friend of his father encouraged him to join the Marine Corps. The family friend served as a Marine in Vietnam. After high school, Constantine applied for a Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarship but was

denied. He was not deterred. He knew he wanted to serve in the Marines. "I remember sitting on the hill outside of D-Hall as the Persian Gulf War kicked off in 1990–91," he says. "My goal was to become a Marine officer."

Constantine joined the Marine Corps in 1997 while still enrolled at the University of Denver School of Law. He earned his law degree in 1998. He has served as a prosecutor and as a defense counsel. "In just my first year as a defense counsel in Japan, I probably handled about 10 fully-contested trials, argued 25 motions, managed over 50 guilty pleas with sentencing arguments, and had 15 administrative hearings," he says.

He volunteered for his first deployment in 2006 to Iraq. He was a civil affairs team leader attached to an infantry battalion in Al-Anbar Province at the height of the insurgency. At that point, it was difficult to find Iraqis willing to work with U.S. and coalition forces. One of Constantine's goals



Major Justin Constantine ('92) and his wife, Dahlia, work to help wounded veterans successfully reintegrate into American society and allow Americans to show their pride and appreciation with T-Shirts for Troops at www.iraqandback.com.

Lights

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was to enable Iraqi contractors to rebuild the basic infrastructure of their cities. He says, "If you provide Iraqis with a stake in their own community, you inject money into the local economy and give them a positive outlet for their energy. When people are busy working and contributing to the well-being of their families, they are not sitting around thinking about ways to attack others."

His exemplary service in Iraq earned Constantine several medals and badges while deployed in Iraq. He currently works with the FBI in the National Security Law Branch. Prior to joining the FBI, he served as a lawyer and counsel for the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Constantine's injury earned him the Purple Heart, and his story has another "Purple" connection. The JMU Duke writer of this article, Capt. Jeffrey Cretz ('03), is a reservist in the U.S. Air Force who served in Afghanistan. And, while Constantine spent part of his recovery in the National Naval Medical Center, Lt. Rachel Engler ('05) was one of his nurses. Read about all three of them on JMU's Operation Purple Pride website at www.jmu.edu/bethechange/operation-purple-pride.shtml. 

* Learn more about Justin Constantine and T-Shirts for Troops at www.iraqandback.com.

