

The Long Road Back

Alexandria soldier first amputee to re-deploy in Iraq combat zone

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David Rozelle of Alexandria knows a lot about the price of freedom.

The U.S. Army captain and Alexandria resident is a veteran of the Iraqi war who lost his right foot two years ago when an anti-tank mine exploded.

He received the Purple Heart medal for being wounded in action, became a best-selling author for a book about his war experience and how he was eventually re-certified for duty even with an artificial foot, and was the first amputee cleared to go back into a combat zone in Iraq.

And he has a lot to say about the issues around that war.

“People two generations before us,” he said in an interview last week, “knew how to sacrifice for their country.” But he said that has changed.

“Many people in our country have become fat and lazy, and don’t know how to give something up to have freedom. They have no idea what the impoverished conditions are in Iraq, and are really detached from the reality of what it is to provide freedom to others.”

Much of his story is spelled out in his autobiography, *Back in Action*, a New York Times bestseller that the A&E cable network recently selected as one of the Top 10 biographies of the year.

Rozelle said that when someone inquires about his injury and then asks, “How do you feel about the war?” he delivers a stern response. “I give them my stone-faced look and say, ‘How do you feel about your freedom? If you aren’t willing to die for it then you aren’t American.’ ”

He said he is careful to always try to send the right message about the mission in Iraq. For instance, “the week I met my new foot,” he said that a reporter from CBS News followed him around.



Courtesy of Rozelle Family
Capt. David Rozelle with his wife, Kim, and son, Forrest, of Old Town.

“I was proud, and felt that I was sending a positive message to the American people,” said Rozelle. He complained that “the media would invade the lives of families of fallen soldiers and put them on display – not as a tribute, but as a way to taint public opinion against the war.”

He said that this type of “exploitive and politically driven negative propaganda was not in the historic spirit of honoring dead soldiers. So I felt I could tell story of success.”

Born a Soldier

Rozelle told the story of how he was born in Texas, about the time that the Vietnam War was winding down, and was adopted at birth by John and Judy Rozelle.

Inspired by a family tradition of military service going all the way back to the American Revolution, Rozelle said he enlisted in the North Carolina National Guard in August 1993 and was commissioned in May 1995 as he graduated with a degree in English from Davidson College.

In 1999, after rising through the ranks in field training positions, he was commissioned as an Army captain and deployed to Kuwait as part of Operation Desert Spring, an ongoing forward deployment of combat troops.

In 2001, Rozelle said, he received a command he had fervently sought with the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment (3rd ACR) out of Fort Carson, Colo. This is the same unit of Teddy Roosevelt, whose 3rd ACR Rough Riders conquered San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish-American War.

Capt. Rozelle later said that he believed the day he reported to duty with the 3rd ACR, he said, was the same day that “I believe my journey to Iraq started.” It was Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists commandeered passenger planes and destroyed the World Trade Center towers in New York and attacked the Pentagon in Arlington.

A growing number of critics have said there was no connection between the 9/11 attacks by al Qaeda terrorists and Saddam Hussein’s B’aath Party regime in Iraq, and that the United States made a mistake invading that nation over misplaced fears that Saddam was harboring or developing weapons of mass destruction.

But Rozelle said Saddam was clearly a threat. “Even [former] President Clinton said that Iraq was a threat because of its nuclear, biological and chemical capabilities,” he said.



Alexandria Times Staff
Photo/Bob Lennox

David Rozelle left, lost his right foot two years ago in Iraq. He re-deployed to Iraq a year later, and now is administrator of the amputee care center at Walter Reed Medical Center.



Courtesy of The Honolulu
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David Rozelle

In addition, Rozelle said the Iraqi leader had shown that he was a threat in that region. “I stood over a gravesite in Iraq of 3,000 people that were shot in the head, and some of them buried alive,” he said. “Is Saddam Hussein not a weapon of mass destruction?”

“There was no doubt in my mind what our mission was; it was to get rid of the terrorists, whether the B’ath Party or al Qaeda.”

Rozelle also said that the U.S. after 9/11 had launched a “global war on terrorism” not simply a “global war on al Qaeda.”

He said he received orders sending him to Iraq in February 2003, while his wife, Kim, was several months’ pregnant. He was deployed two months later.

Into Iraq

Rozelle’s book details his first months in Iraq, spent securing a dusty, forlorn town called Hit where the B’ath Party had its regional headquarters for the Ar Ramadi region.

On June 21, 2003, while Rozelle was leading a convoy in that town, his vehicle struck a land mine and his right foot was injured beyond repair. He received treatment first at a field hospital outside of Baghdad, then at Landstuhl Military Hospital in Germany and finally at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

Rozelle said he spent eight months recovering at Fort Carson, Colo., during which he made remarkable strides. Soon he was working out, and eight weeks after that he succeeded in his goal of skiing before Christmas.

He kept pushing. By February 2004, Rozelle had completed his first of five sprint-distance triathlons, and two months later he ran the New York City Marathon.

By that summer, Rozelle said, he was competing in Olympic-distance triathlons and won his age division against non-handicapped competitors.

Realizing how integral sports were to his healing process, Rozelle said that last year he volunteered for Disabled Sports USA to help other wounded soldiers. Through that process, he said he realized that while he was “out of command in Iraq, I was part of something that seemed more important” by “taking care of soldiers back home.”

Rozelle said he thinks “it is important for the American public to see how we overcome. These soldiers are proud to be injured veterans, and proud to have almost given their lives for something great.” Through the sports program for the disabled, he said, “we renew athletics in athletic people, and inspire them with the courage and confidence they need to go back out and take life by the horns.”

Return to Duty

In March 2004, Rozelle was again declared “fit for duty.” That June, almost a year after his injury, he was chosen to command a cavalry troop in Iraq and assigned to the 3rd ACR. In the

process, he said he became the first troop commander in recent military history to redeploy as an amputee to the same battlefield.

His military honors have included the Bronze Star Medal (for actions in combat), the Purple Heart, the Army Commendation Medal (four awards) and the Army Achievement Medal (three awards).

Returning from Iraq six months later, he wrote *Back in Action*, which Regnery Books published in February.

This past August, Rozelle became administrator of the amputee care center at Walter Reed as part of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment.

As such, he said he is second in command of the facility and helps create programs for the new amputee center being built at Walter Reed as well as an additional center in San Antonio.

He said his decision to work in amputee support meant rejecting lucrative job offers in the private sector, and flattering appeals to become involved in politics.

Rozelle said he expected to be promoted to the rank of major next year. And after finishing his work helping fellow amputees, he said he also plans to be "back in action" in several years with the 3rd ACR.