

Amputee earns title of 'SERGEANT AIRBORNE'

By Cheryl Rodewig
Army News Service

Like thousands before him, Sgt. Joel Dulashanti donned the black hat of an Airborne instructor for the first time Aug. 22, signifying his completion of a detailed certification process with 1st Battalion (Airborne), 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment, at Fort Benning, Ga.

Unlike those before him, however, he met the standard with a prosthetic leg, a partial knee replacement and the aftermath of several internal injuries received during an ambush in Afghanistan. With his wounds, he could have taken a medical discharge from the Army. But the NCO chose to stay in — and remain Airborne all the way.

"It's still brand new," he said, "But it feels good to actually have my hat."

Dulashanti's determination in the face of adversity, evident during his own training, will be instrumental in instructing Airborne students, said Command Sgt. Maj. Chip Mezzaline, battalion command sergeant major. More than 17,000 students come through the battalion each year.

"He's had a traumatic injury and had the resilience to stay on active duty and serve as an instructor in a position that's high-risk," Mezzaline said. "It's in his character — something you can't teach. It's something inside him that's going to

drive him to be successful in whatever it is he's doing. I don't think 'can't' is in his vocabulary. Him being a Sergeant Airborne — a Black Hat — at the Basic Airborne Course will inspire numerous students coming through here."

Mezzaline said Dulashanti completed the instructor certification program at a level "above the standard." He was trained on the lateral-drift apparatus, mock towers, the 250-foot tower, swing-landing trainer and spin harness. He also memorized a block of instruction for the mock-tower exit.

"He's a paratrooper," Mezzaline said. "He comes from the 82nd Airborne Division. That Airborne career he probably thought was cut short. But this is a new life for him here at the Airborne School. I predict within the next year he'll be a jumpmaster — probably a senior-rated jumpmaster — and he'll be doing door checks, exiting students at 1,250 feet above Fryer Drop Zone. With his level of motivation, he'll probably move on to that next mark and be a centurion, which is 100 exits out of an aircraft. The sky's the limit for Sgt. Dulashanti here at the 507th."

Dulashanti said he wants to do everything he can while stationed at Fort Benning, including becoming a jumpmaster and centurion. In the Army for six years, he arrived at the battalion in May. The same month, four years prior, he

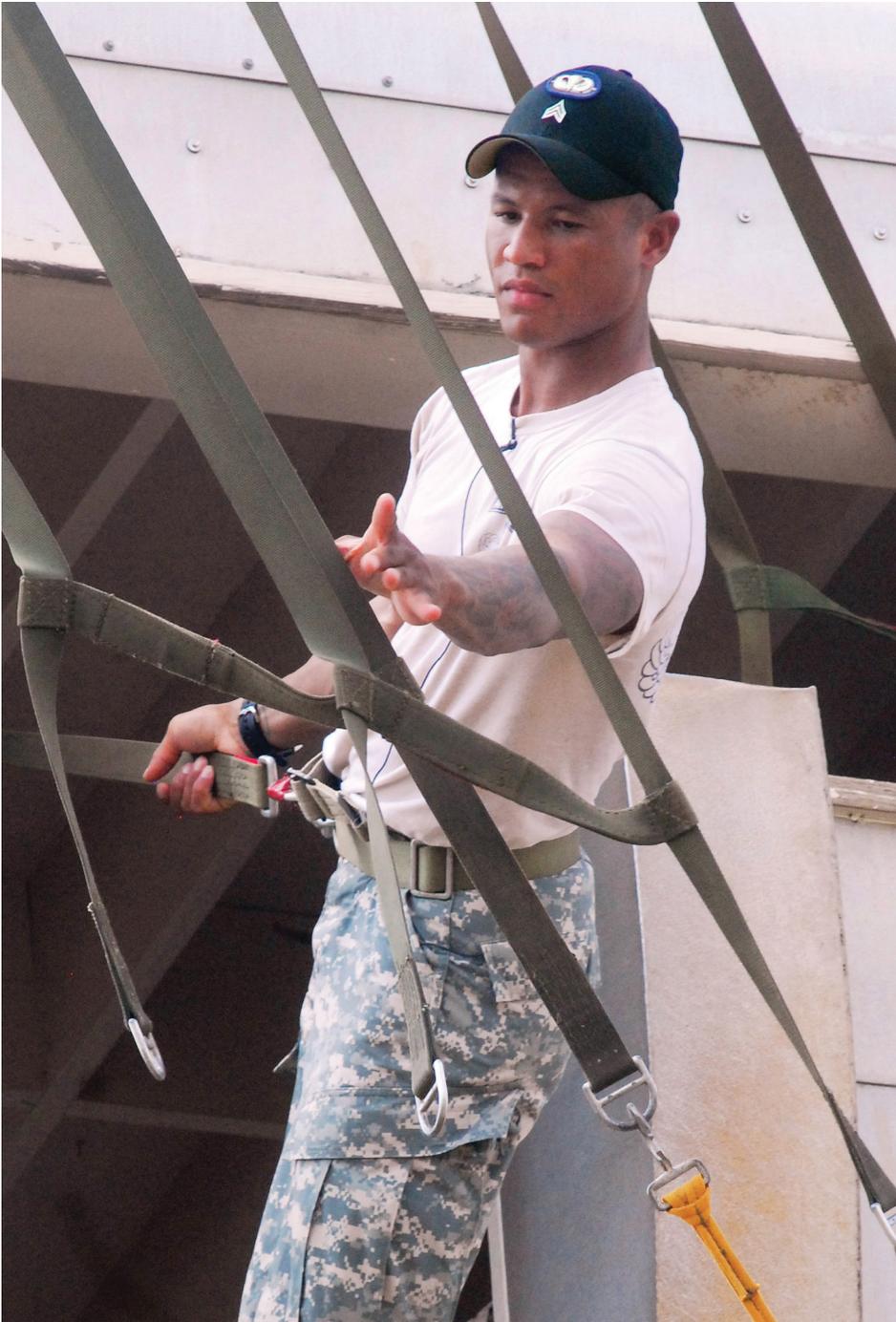
was deployed as a sniper attached to the 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. He remembers the details of his deployment vividly.

"We were chasing two guys — they were on a moped together, and we were in humvees," he said. "They took off in the field, and the sniper team went out. It was about 110 degrees outside, over 6,000 feet above sea level and with no humidity. All you could smell was the earth and burnt grass. All of a sudden, as we were walking in this knee-high grass, I started to smell body odor, so I stopped and turned to my right — in the direction of the odor. They began to engage in contact.

"They had AK-47s, and they were lying in the prone about 10 meters away," he continued. "I took two rounds to my right knee. As I was coming out of the sun, I was shot through my left knee. As I was falling, the next round that came through went under my arm, through my rib cage and, since I was parallel to the ground, it traversed my entire abdomen down to my pelvis. That round was the worst. We returned fire, and those guys were finished."

Two platoons donated plasma to him before he was evacuated to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. It took him eight months there to become comfortable walking again.

"The recovery process started off slow, (but) I accelerated fast," he said. "Most of the stuff can be replaced. I have



Sgt. Joel Dulashanti reaches for a harness strap during training at Eubanks Field at Fort Benning, Ga.

Photo by Cheryl Rodewig

a partial knee replacement on my left side. I have an above-the-knee amputation on my right side. I'm missing half of my stomach and 90 percent of my intestines and gall bladder, and half of my abdominal wall is gone."

He chose to stay in the Army in part for the fellow Soldiers recuperating alongside him in the hospital.

"I had to set that example for the rest of the Army, just based on the fact they couldn't do it, and they wanted to," he said. "Maybe in the future somebody else

will have an easier time getting to do stuff like this because I've done it already."

Since then, Dulashanti has completed the Warrior Leader Course and the Advanced Leaders Course, among others. But his goal was to be part of Fort Benning's Airborne battalion.

"Mentally, I knew I could exit an aircraft, and I knew I was able to instruct people on how to exit an aircraft and to land on the ground properly," he said. "When I called about the job, the only question was 'Can you jump out of

planes?' Even though I hadn't done it, the answer was 'yes, without a doubt.' I knew I wouldn't be a safety hazard, so the answer was 'yes.'"

"It was pretty intense," Dulashanti said of the studying it took to pass the certification program. But other instructors helped him along the way.

He said there are some things he does better than Soldiers without amputations, but other things he struggles to do at all.

"I have to kind of be on my A-game all the time," he said. "But at the same time, I do have limitations. So I have to make sure I take care of myself to prevent injury."

His "limitations" aren't something he tells every class of students about, but occasionally he mentions them or they find out.

"Sometimes people ask me why I have a limp," he said. "I tell them I don't have a leg, so it's not really a limp."

His advice to other wounded warriors is simple: Choose whether to have a positive outlook.

"Make up your mind," he said. "Everybody has to go through their own coping mechanisms. Sometimes you're in a denial state; when you come out of that denial state, then deal with what it is you have to deal with. Seek counseling if you have to. I never gave negativity an opportunity to invade my mind. There was only one route for me in the first place."