

Sergeant Courageous

The first thing you notice about Army Sgt. Manuel Mendoza is his charismatic smile—Tom Cruise would be envious. The second thing you notice as he lies in his hospital bed is that half his body is missing, blown away by a roadside bomb that destroyed the Armored Personnel Carrier he was commanding in Sadr City, Iraq.

Mendoza's life was altered forever last October 3rd. Within a week of his injury, he was under treatment at the Walter Reed military hospital in Washington, DC. Now he spends his days coming back. He undergoes rigorous physical therapy and exercise sessions designed to strengthen his upper body and his will. Sgt. Mendoza will soon be fitted with artificial legs and will need all the determination he can muster to regain his mobility.

I'm betting Mendoza will do it because he is a special guy. Born in Los Reyes, Mexico in 1981, he and his family legally entered the United States, four years later becoming resident aliens. His father worked as a logger in Northern California and the little boy and his two siblings barely had a slice of the American dream. Mendoza's family struggled with dignity.

After graduating high school, Manuel Mendoza did what so many poor young men before him had done: he joined the military to secure educational benefits and discipline. Mendoza loved the army, quickly moving through the ranks. As a sergeant he was in charge of men years older. He told me he was proud to serve in Iraq, believing America is trying to bring freedom to that chaotic country.

Mendoza's wounds are terrible. He lost one leg all the way up to the hip, the other above the knee. Other men sink into depression when faced with that kind of catastrophe; Mendoza did not. He joked with the doctors and nurses. He encouraged

his depressed mother, brother and little sister. He did not complain and did not feel sorry for himself, although he had a perfect right to do so. He did, however, ask his government for one favor. He asked to be made an American citizen.

And so in early December, Manuel Mendoza took the oath of citizenship. He is now a full-fledged American. But those who know Manuel also know he is much more than that. He is a symbol of what America is at its core: generous, optimistic and tough. Sgt. Mendoza's face should be on a stamp.

Often it is difficult for strangers to talk with wounded military people. You want them to see your respect and your sympathy, but not too much of the latter. You want them to talk about themselves, but you don't want to intrude on their suffering. You want to help them, but you really can't outside of the conversation, and perhaps a gift or some letters.

But talking with Sgt. Mendoza was easy. He vividly remembered his time in Iraq and was clearly proud of his service. He overwhelmed me with his positive outlook and hope for the future. Mendoza wants to attend college, marry, have children, and have an exciting career.

And he will. I do not doubt this for a moment. For sitting and working out in Walter Reed hospital right now is a man every bit as heroic as any American icon. A man who was willing to sacrifice everything so that people half way around the world could have a shot at freedom. A man who is challenged every second of every day and meets the challenge with true grit and an uplifting smile.

On paper, Sgt. Manuel Mendoza may be one of the newest Americans. But in his heart and mind he has always been one. We fellow Americans salute you, sir.