

Senior NCO Overcomes Setback, Learns Value of Medical Profiles

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At 44 years old, 1st Sgt. Jon Otis has served in the U.S. Army for half of his life. Otis' years of service as an infantryman, and later as an air defender, at numerous assignments across the U.S., not to mention five separate combat deployments, have worn wrinkles mirroring the many emotions he has worn on his face.

"I grew up in an Army where profiles were pretty much looked down upon, and I would say I probably didn't have much compassion for Soldiers who had profiles because our leadership influenced us to just push through it," said Otis, senior enlisted advisor for A Battery, 6th Battalion, 52nd Air Defense Regiment, 35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade.

"I had been on profile two times in my 20-year career, and they were both for rolled ankles during basketball games," he said.

Otis' mindset was forever changed after a series of life-altering events.

“One morning, I woke up with a pain in my leg,” he said. “But it was a Wednesday and we had a long weekend coming up so I figured I could recover, put some ice on it and be ready for work on Monday.”

By Sunday night, Otis’ right leg had become dark red and swollen to twice its normal size.

“He stopped by the office, as many leaders do, to have a medic give the minimum medical treatment that allows them to drive on with their mission,” said Maj. David Grant, former 35th ADA brigade surgeon. “But for Otis, that type of care just wasn’t an option.”

Grant sent Otis to the hospital for further examination.

Otis’ physician told him that it might have been a blood clot, but by the end of the week he had severe infections in both legs.

“It became three times worse than it had started out to be,” Otis said. “My legs were paralyzed and I had excruciating pain surging throughout my body.”

Doctors told Otis he had reactive arthritis and ordered him to remain in bed for as long as possible.

Behind closed doors, leaders spoke with his doctors about shipping Otis out of Korea and to a Warrior Transition Unit for possible medical separation.

Otis, who was a sergeant first class at the time, had other plans.

“I needed to be eligible for promotion; I needed to pass an Army Physical Fitness Test so I set my goal and that’s what I did,” Otis said.

Doctors were not confident that Otis could make a full recovery and certainly not within the six months he would need to be eligible for the centralized master sergeant board that would convene in January.

But Otis’ chain of command supported his decision to remain in Korea, contribute to the air defense community and ultimately, overcome his disability.

“I love Korea for a lot of reasons but most importantly, I like the fact that there is no sense of entitlement here,” he said. “Everyone works; everyone earns their keep, and that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

For the next three months, Otis remained bed-ridden but determined to contribute to his unit.

The 35th ADA Brigade’s Operations sergeant major, Sgt. Maj. Michael Arnold, recounted his first meeting with Otis upon hitting the ground in Osan.

“When I arrived in Korea, I was met by the Brigade Operations Noncommissioned Officer in Charge 1st Sgt. Otis. He was utilizing a walker and could barely move around due to his illness,” Arnold said. “But, from the first time I met 1st Sgt. Otis, I knew this NCO was the real deal. First Sgt. Otis truly demonstrated the Army values of selfless service, personal courage,

loyalty and duty.”

Through physical therapy and determination, Otis progressed from his bed to a wheelchair.

“I was improving little by little but the whole process was overwhelming,” Otis said.

Otis’ marriage was also failing and he had less than three months to get out of his wheelchair and onto the PT track.

“I had incredible support from my chain of command, from my battle buddies and from the spouses within the unit,” Otis said. “Going to a WTU in the States wouldn’t have motivated me to overcome my physical limitations the same way my peers motivated me to get back in the fight.”

Otis said that the Warrior Ethos’ mantra of “I will never quit,” coupled with the overwhelming support from his battle buddies, kept him focused on meeting his goals.

In six months, Otis improved from being bed-ridden, to using a wheelchair, to utilizing a walker, then crutches, a cane, and finally to taking and passing an APFT.

“The brigade was critically short on ADA master sergeants,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Jose Villarreal, 35th ADA senior enlisted advisor. “When the list came out and Otis was selected, we knew we wanted him to lead our Soldiers.”

“He had proved his work ethic before his setback and then he went on to lead by example through his resilient recovery,” Villarreal said.

Otis was pinned and then frocked by his command.

“This whole ordeal has taught me so much,” Otis said. “I learned the validity of a medical profile, the necessity of a functioning reconditioning program, and a real sense of empathy for my Soldiers when they too encounter an injury.”

Otis said that he continues to feel pain as a result of his illness, but that it won’t stop him from continuing to serve.

He said, “Compassion of my leadership is what got me where I am today and I plan to give it all that I have as long as I am here.”