

WCAP NCO's Story of Courage Shared with Sports Superstars at ESPY Awards

By Pablo Villa - NCO Journal

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Sgt. Elizabeth Marks gave an emotional speech after receiving the Pat Tillman Award for Service during the ESPY Awards on Wednesday night in Los Angeles. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program)

Sgt. Elizabeth Marks is more than merely fit for duty. She is a testament to service. On Wednesday night, the biggest names in sports were introduced to her story.

Marks, a combat medic and member of the U.S. Army World Class Athlete program of Fort Carson, Colorado, was presented with the Pat Tillman Award for Service during the ESPYs. The awards show, which recognizes grand sports achievements, aired on ABC.

Marks is the first active-duty Soldier to receive the award. She was awarded for using swimming to recover from debilitating hip injuries she received in Iraq in 2010. Marks has not only parlayed her newfound sport to great heights — last week she was named to the 2016 U.S. Paralympic swim team that will compete later this year in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She has also inspired hordes of her fellow Soldiers.

“I have struggled for a long time with survival guilt,” Marks said in a video shown to the audience before the award presentation. “I felt selfish for wanting to go and compete when I could do other things to help people. I started getting mail and having people reach out to me who had been injured saying, ‘I saw your story and I wanted to go swim,’ and that, for me, was better than any medal I could ever win.”

But win she has. Marks is ranked No. 1 in the world in the 100-meter breaststroke. But beyond her prowess in the pool, Marks has also displayed immense gratitude and humility. That was no more evident than earlier this year when she made international headlines for her gesture at the Invictus Games in Orlando, Florida.

Marks was decorated with her fourth gold medal at the Games by Prince Harry, the British royal who created the competition, an international Paralympic-style, multi-sport event, which allows wounded, injured or sick armed services personnel and veterans to compete. After he placed the medal around Marks’ neck, the 25-year-old gave the award back.

Marks wanted Prince Harry to deliver the medal to Papworth Hospital in Cambridge, England, where she spent the duration of the inaugural Invictus Games in 2014. Marks traveled to London in the fall of that year to compete in the Games when she collapsed with respiratory distress syndrome. Her condition worsened and she was eventually hospitalized and placed on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, or ECMO, life support to help her breathe. She missed the Games, but Marks said she was fortunate to come back alive. She said donating one of her medals was the only way she could think of to repay the hospital staff. Her request was honored June 1.

For Marks, it wasn’t the first time she had to endure an arduous hospital stay. In 2010, after suffering devastating injuries in Iraq, she grew nervous about the words being bandied about her such as “end of service” or “retirement.” Marks called her father to vent her frustrations. The former Marine told his daughter to write what was most important to her on a piece of paper. She scrawled “FFD” in pencil on a torn sheet of paper. The acronym stood for “fit for duty.” She was deemed fit for duty on July 3, 2012, after several painful surgeries and exhaustive rehabilitation. Marks has not stopped trying to live up to the notion, resuming her job as a medic while also competing for WCAP.

She was back in the pool one month after her ordeal in England. Two months after leaving the hospital, she broke an American record in the SB9, a disability swimming classification, 200-meter breaststroke. Less than two years later, she set a new world record in the 50-meter breaststroke in the SB7 division.

“I was told it’d be six months before I got into a pool again,” Marks said during the video. “I got into a pool about a month out of my coma. Without those physicians, without their service, I would’ve died. I hope that my service could eventually mean that to someone.”

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Marks received a standing ovation after accepting the award on the stage of the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles. She thanked her father and the Pat Tillman Foundation for turning an "absolute tragedy into a triumph." She also thanked her fellow injured service members throughout the world for their support. She said any success she finds at the Rio Paralympics will be because of them. Marks closed with an emotional parting message.

"If you're hurting, whether it's mental or emotional, if ever you think you're alone, you're not," she said. "And if ever you think no one cares, I do. Please come join me behind the blocks."