

Episode 06: Josh had his leg amputated

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to lose one of your legs? I think just about everyone just takes their legs for granted. We've always had them, they get us where we need to go, they just do their job. Until they don't.

My guest on the show today is Josh. He was in the Army and stationed in Iraq, and he worked as a gunner inside an Abrams tank. One day his tank parked over a roadside bomb, and there was an explosion that destroyed the tank, along with Josh's left foot.

Josh told me the whole story, from the moment it happened, to somehow exiting the tank and getting to safety, his multiple surgeries, and his decision to finally just amputate and be done with it. He talked about prosthetics and what it was like to put that on for the first time, and what he is able to do.

And Josh also has some advice for other vets and amputees about how he has dealt with this situation. He's come a long way.

For everything Josh and I discussed, I'll have links in the show notes for this episode, which is at whatwasthatlike.com/06. I'll also have Josh's email address there, if you would like to contact him directly. To see pictures of Josh as well as the destroyed tank, you can follow me on Instagram at [whatwasthatlike](https://www.instagram.com/whatwasthatlike) (no spaces).

So without further ado, my conversation with Josh.

Scott

Josh, welcome to the show!

Josh

Thanks for having me!

Scott

We're going to talk about an explosion today. I want to know when the explosion first happened, did you actually realize the extent of your injuries?

Josh

No. I wasn't even sure of anything at that present moment. The first thing that I tried to do was find my cigarette that I had just lit. Then, once everything started fading in, I could start hearing again. Everybody was screaming and that's when I realized that I had been blown up. I actually started to check myself, but I didn't really feel much yet. I knew something was wrong - my foot had been crushed. I felt a lot of pressure but I didn't feel any pain yet.

Scott

So there was no pain at that point?

Josh

No, just a lot of pressure.

Scott

When you say 'pressure', can you describe that? What does that mean?

Josh

It felt like somebody had sat on my leg or something. It felt more like that than actual pain. Okay.

Scott

All right. Well, let's back up for a minute. How old were you when you actually joined the military?

Josh

I joined on the day when I turned 17. My parents signed a slip saying that I could join during that time.

Scott

So, you can sign up at the age of 17 if you have parents permission, and you can sign up at the age of 18 on your own - is that the way it is?

Josh

Yes

Scott

Okay. What was your age when you actually went to Iraq?

Josh

19.

Scott

What kind of training do you get before you actually go into the theater of war?

Josh

Well, it's a combination of different kinds of training. You have One Station Unit training which is what most Combat Arms do - which is your job training and basic training together. For me, it was a little over 4 months in Fort Knox, Kentucky - they've moved the armor school down to Benning now. Then, once you have your job training - depending upon what your station is - you'll be doing scenarios and stuff like that at your duty station. Then, you have more specific things like a convoy simulator - which is a video game, basically - where you really learn how to function as a unit. You'll also have additional training - we learned more about IEDs.

Scott

For people that don't know, what is an IED?

Josh

It's an "Improvised Explosive Device."

Scott

So, it could typically be a bomb that's somewhere on the side of the road, is that right?

Josh

It could be a whole slew of different things. It could be tripwires on doors. We were told that, at one time, they would hide some behind posters and when you tear it down, it gets released. It's a pretty general term but the most common are the ones that are underneath the side of the roads. There are also pressure plates, which are like a mine that trigger the explosive. There's

also EFP, which is “Explosively Formed Projectile” - an explosive with a copper disk to create a plasma that they'll just shoot straight through your vehicle and there's nothing you can do about that.

Scott

What was your job? What were you assigned?

Josh

I was a tank gunner on an M1 Abrams.

Scott

An M1 Abrams... I've never been in the military, but what I've seen and read about the Abrams tank is that it's one of the bigger or more heavily fortified tanks. Is that right?

Josh

Technically speaking, it's the only main battle tank in the military. Otherwise, it's a cavalry, a fighting vehicle, or an armored personnel carrier - it's a technicality thing. But yes, it's 70 tons and uses 120 mm main guns. There are three machine guns on it: one for the loader on top of the turret; one for the tank commander on top of the turret; and then there's the coaxially mounted one. There are other variants like the TUSK - Tank Urban Survival Kit - that have another one mounted on the main gun. So, it actually gives the gunner access to 2 machine guns even though you sit down inside the tank.

Scott

So, as the gunner, you were in charge of all of those guns?

Josh

No. As the gunner, I control the main gun, the turret, and the coaxial one.

Scott

How many people are in the tank?

Josh

Four people. But we had lost a few people to either death, injury, or family issues. So, we were only running with 3 people that day.

Scott

Okay. All right. So, let's talk about that day. You were in Iraq, I believe, in the city of Mosul - is that right?

Josh

Yep. Just going down the road.

Scott

Can you just take us on the trip and tell us what happened?

Josh

That day, at the beginning of Part II, it wasn't exciting. We swept through one side of the city clearing IEDs on that route. Then, we went across the bridge and went over to the west side...

Scott

Let me just stop you for a second. When you say you were going through and clearing IEDs, how do you clear them? Do you just drive over and let them blow up?

Josh

No. We drive real slow. We're a really big target looking for IEDs. We go with an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit. They have a vehicle that has a camera, a probing arm, and all that stuff on it. They also have a robot that they can throw out the back, take a C4 over to it, and blow it up in place. So, we just go real slow and look for everything everywhere. If we don't spot it, it'll end up blowing up on us.

Scott

But in most cases, when it does blow up, you're so heavily armored that it doesn't do any serious damage - is that right?

Josh

We don't have to worry about, for instance, tires popping because it's tracked. But we missed one. It was very clearly disguised with a whole bunch of power components, powerlines, stuff like that on the side of the road. We missed it and it detonated on - I forget the name of the vehicle - the RGV, which I don't know what that stands for. It was a new vehicle that I've never seen before and we are using it here. So, it detonated, blew all the tires, and stuff like that. The vehicle was fine, other than the blown tires and the broken glass. The glass is so thick that when it breaks, it stays in place - it's ballistic glass up to 4 inches thick.

Scott

So, your job was to go out, find these things, and take care of them before someone else just happened to go down the road and hit it?

Josh

Correct.

Scott

Okay. All right. So you're out doing that. What happened next?

Josh

Well, that day, we went over to the worst side of the city which was, at that time, the west side. We were retaking a black route. A black route means it's just impassable due to IEDs. So, unless you're rolling heavy, you don't go down that way. We were retaking Barracuda Rat and Weasel, which were the street names and we were going to put up a combat outpost called "Inman", after my commander who had been killed in December, which was the month before so. Once we headed over there on that side, we got into a firefight and it was a knock-down-drag-out. They stayed and actually fought quite hard - I'm not exactly sure why, as we were in armored vehicles. They did shoot quite a few RPGs as well. So, the best way to explain this is it's a large route - it's a 4-lane road with a divider in the middle - and we're just taking contact from left and right. We had a Bradley with us who was part of the combat engineers' that melted down their M240 barrels. Then, they finally got out of the way for us to start doing our work in the Abrams, which was to screw stuff up - we'll put it that way. My sister tank dropped canister rounds, which was interesting. I've never seen one of those fired in combat.

Scott

What is that? What does that mean?

Josh

A canister round is a - I think XM1028 is the nomenclature for it - a hardened steel bucket full of 1,150 hardened tungsten balls. That is essentially a giant shotgun out of a cannon. So it uh, it was well.

Scott

So, it covers a wide, wide target area?

Josh

Correct. It's effective up to 500 meters - a further spread out would just be ineffective. They had an RPG guy, they hit him with it, and there was just pink mist. I remember that the convoy commander yelled, "Did you kill him? They're like, "We don't know. We can't confirm it. There was no body to confirm." That body was just vaporized, essentially, so it was pretty nuts. I mean, we were shooting hundreds of rounds from the coax gun and, then, we had RPG skipping off the tank, so that was interesting. I know that they've skipped because it would hit the tank and bounce off. Because I was looking down my main gun, I saw it land in front of my sights, and I was like, "Holy crap!!"

Scott

So you saw it go off in your sights. There wasn't any damage to the tank from that?

Josh

Depending upon the RPG - there are a couple of different variants. It's just essentially a rocket-propelled grenade - it's designed to throw shrapnel. They have other ones like the RPG-7 which has, I think, a penetrator in it - anyway, it's more anti-armor. So, they have different variants of it for different purposes. So yeah, that one went off and nothing happened. I mean, to be honest, we've been hit two other times in the tank - like, directly on us - and I've been blown up once in a Humvee before - I was knocked out in that one. When it comes to the tank, as I'm looking back now, the first one that we hit was hilarious when it went off, I was like, "Wait, what? That's it? That's an IED? Oh, I'm fine!"

Scott

So you felt a little bit invincible?

Josh

Sort of, yeah. I didn't know how big it was or what it was when it went off. I was just, like, "Oh, man. This is gonna be a cakewalk, dude!" I wasn't worried anymore because IEDs were the number one killer. There was another time when I was blown up in a Humvee, I got knocked out by that one. That one made my butthole-plucker - I was pretty nervous for a couple of days after that. The Humvee got shredded a little bit by what looked like a 155 shell with some ball bearings around it - so, it broke some crap, put some holes in through the hood, and everything like that. The blast had slammed my face off the 50 Cal - this was at night, so I was wearing my night vision device - and broke my night vision device off of my Rhino mount. Anyway, back to that day, when we were in that firefight. In the beginning, we had to pull around a corner and then go around another corner - a left, then a right - which is about two 300 meters apart. We had split off - one person at the right and one person at the left - so that we could do security at 360 degrees. So, we were out of our normal marching order. That's one of the reasons why that had happened. As we go down that road and make that second turn to go back - the streets

kind of run parallel, kind of, like, an H without the bottom leg on it - So we had rounded the corner and then it started up again, we started taking fire from PSF - which is Precision Small Arms - and snipers. Then, we were getting more RPGs. There was just a lot of fire. I was just, like, "Man, I didn't even think that they had this man around." Usually, they never stick around - they'll drop a magazine, they'll drop an RPG, and then hightail it out of there because they can't stand toe-to-toe with us - but they were going for the gold that day and I think it's because of that IED that they had there.

Scott

Do you think they were trying to, kind of, fight and direct you toward that?

Josh

Possibly. Yeah, actually, that makes a lot of sense. I didn't think about it too much. I mean, that whole area was just a shit show. There was only about a block in between the two roads that we were originally on. So, for us to be drawn over there, it was an interesting and complex ambush. Once the fighting stopped, there was a little lull for a little bit, and then we tried to get back into our order of March. We're supposed to be next to the lead vehicle - no. 2 in the order of March so that we can defend the rest of the convoy.

Scott

How many vehicles were in this March overall?

Josh

Maybe, six?

Scott

And you were supposed to be no. 2?

Josh

Yeah. It's better for smaller vehicles to be upfront so that they can respond better and one of the trained people is up there looking for it. Technically, what we did in the tanks is convoy security. The only reason we were using tanks was that they had catastrophic kills - which means we could blow up a vehicle and everybody dies in it. So, we were about to pull over onto, kind of, the grass strip dirt in this scenario which is the number one thing that you don't do because it's too easy to just hide an IED there. So, everybody on my tank is like, "Dude... No! Fuck that! This is bullshit! So I'm talking with my driver, and Bs in kind of like, dude, yeah, no, this is after, like, tell them to do it. They have the IED-resistant vehicle anyway.

We'll just get back in our order much further down the road. So, we pull up to the median and all of us are clenching.

I lit up a cigarette, he yanked down the gas - kind of like a motorcycle's twistable throttle - slammed down on it, and then it went "Boom!" That was the big one.

There had already been other vehicles passing through it, but they were aiming for the tank. It's better for publicity and propaganda if they knock out the biggest, hardest vehicle, right?

Scott

So, it's a pressure-activated switch that lighter vehicles wouldn't set off?

Josh

No. They just didn't trigger it to blow up on them.

Scott

Oh, so somebody was watching?

Josh

Yep. Most likely, they triggered it from the house that they had dug the tunnel from. I mean, I didn't know that at the time. All I could tell was that I just got blown up. They had dug a tunnel from inside the house underneath the road. So, there was no way for us to tell that there was even anything there.

Scott

So were you rendered unconscious when it went off?

Josh

Yeah, I just had a blackout. It felt different than the other time that I had been blown up though, which always makes me wonder. I had, like, my life flash before my eyes kind of thing - I felt like I lived my whole existence again in a split second. Then, everything hurts - it feels like my outsides were on my insides and my insides were on my outsides. Then, I snapped out of it and was like, "What in the world?! Where's my cigarette?! I can't believe this just happened!" Slowly, all my senses came back to me and that's when I could smell. I was actually looking around and went, like, "Holy shit! Oh, wow! We hit a really big one!"

Scott

What did you see and hear?

Josh

Initially, I was staring at my hand for that cigarette. Then, I think the first thing that really came to me was my hearing because then I could hear my tank commander screaming right behind me. They're not screaming out of anger, they're screaming out of pain or the lack of it or whatnot. Then, I could smell - the smell was pretty nauseating because the blast had blown up the Turret Whole Power Distribution Valve (THPDV), which is where the gallons of hydraulic fluid goes through to the different parts of the turret in the hull. So, it shot hot hydraulic fluid all over the tank. Luckily, it's flame-resistant. Then, the dirt, dust, hot metal from the blast, and everything else - it was just a very unpleasant smell. So, they're screaming, and I'm like, "Holy shit! That's when I feel that pressure in my leg. I was sitting down in the gunner's hole and felt like something was not right. So I wanted to pull back and stuff like that. I had some cuts and scrapes, my back felt wonky, and all that. My leg was just my number one priority. So, I kind of helped push my tank commander over to sit on top of the 50 Cal ammo stowage on the turret. When I tried to use my foot to pull myself out, there was one instance of pain. I'll never forget that first time trying to use it - it was bad.

Scott

At this point, your foot was still attached - is that right?

Josh

Yes.

Scott

Okay. What was the damage to your foot? It would have been crushed by metal.

Josh

It was like a floor slap - that's what they call it. When the blast caves in at the bottom of your vehicle, there's barely any room in there for anything. So, my foot was crunched down. Later, at the clinic, they refer to my foot as 'applesauce'.

Scott

It's not something you want your foot to be referred to as?

Josh

No.

Scott

Was it your left foot or your right foot?

Josh

My left foot.

Scott

Okay. I've never been inside a tank, obviously, but I pictured it to be so cramped and tight in there, and you got 3 men kind of crunched inside that tank. How do you get out of a tank that has just been destroyed like that?

Josh

Well, we've trained to do crew evacuations and we're supposed to do it a certain way, but we couldn't go out to the loaders hatch because of the damage done to that side of the tank. So, we had to go out of the commander's hatch. Frankly, I'm too large to be in a tank. There's supposed to be a height limit of 6 ft, but I was 6 ft when I joined the army. Then, in my senior year, I grew by another 3 inches. So, I was far too tall to be in a tank because I outgrew the tank.

When it came to getting out, we were sitting there for a while because once the IED went off, they started shooting again - there were more RPGs and snipers firing. I was trying to try to poke my head out and see what was going on. There were incoming rounds, like, all around the tank. So, we're like, "Shit. We have to stay here." Hughes was still screaming. He was just out of his mind. I couldn't see him and I couldn't get to him because the tank had been blown apart. I couldn't traverse the turret. I couldn't do anything. He's just screaming. We're like, "Can you see anything? Are you alright?" We tried to talk him through first aid, but he's like, "Can you see where my eyes are?" I'm like, "Oh my God! His eyes are gone! I can't get to him because I can't even get out of the tank because I could get shot or blown up again. There's nothing we could do. So, we had to wait until they provided security for us to try and get out. Eventually, it went quiet and he stopped saying anything at all. Now, we're worried that he's dead.

We didn't know what was going on, so I looked out of the commander's hatch again and saw a vehicle beside us. They'd finally provided security and were, like, "Are you guys all right?" I went, "Fuck, no! I just got blown up!" There was supposed to be a system - if you take casualties in a blast and lose radio communication, you're supposed to throw a red ChemLight out of the top of the tank, or if you're fine but lose radio, then you just throw out a green one. However, the original place where that was stowed for us to do that was blown apart. We didn't

even know where the damn ChemLights were. So they didn't know because there's no communication whatsoever.

So, what happened was they pulled us out of the driver's hole. That's why he stopped talking. I thought that he was dead because he's not in the tank anymore. Finally, when it comes to getting out, the commander's hatch is pretty small - I'm a larger guy, I was wearing an extra-large vest and trying to squeeze my way out with my vest on - so, I could barely squeeze myself out of there.

Then, I try to use my leg to get out. That's when I actually had to put my entire body weight on my foot. When I stood on it, it felt like a broken glass that I could feel all the way through my head. I was just "Shit!" Anyway, I can't really get all the way out because I can't use my leg. I tore a bunch of cartilage in my right knee. During the blast, it blew my leg up and back and it ripped the big old tear in it. So my legs weren't working that well. So, I pushed out my tank commander who's a smaller guy, and he got out. He was injured - he snapped the bone in his foot. Other than that, he didn't suffer too much damage. The tank commander sits on a platform off of the turret floor - that's probably why he was mostly fine. He didn't even actually leave the country. He just stayed there and rehabbed in place. I pushed him out, and then he helped pull me out. I'm a bigger guy, so this little Louisiana man was, like, summoning all the strength to help pull me out.

We tried to stay low on top of the tank so that we wouldn't get sniped. We rolled off into the hole and onto the ground. Then, I tried to stand up again, but I couldn't because my knee hurt too much. That's when the real pain started to kick in because all the adrenaline and endorphins had worn off. I felt crazy and alone as I was crawling across the combat zone on my hands and knees in the middle of a street into the Bradley in front of us. I think they didn't know that we were screwed up to be at least as bad as I was. I have crawled for about 25 meters, I'd say, into the back of this Bradley in front of us. Then, finally, they raised up the back door and assured us that we were safe and fine.

We can't tow the tank or anything like that. As a matter of fact, the engine was still running although all of the cables in between the driver and the engine were severed. It's designed to run like that - they sometimes call it combat overdrive - to get you out of a sticky situation. It eventually caught on fire while they were dragging it back to the base, but we didn't stick around for that. They got the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) - which is another tank platoon - out there waiting to hook up the tank and drag it back. One of my buddies from a different squadron actually did it, so it was kind of funny.

So we are in the back of the Bradley and we ride back. Because we're so close to the Forward Operating Base (FOB) that scrambling a helicopter and trying to clear an area is just not worth it. So, we just waited for QRF to get there as quickly as possible. Then, they dragged us into the vehicle and drove us over immediately. That's when I took the X-ray and got my first shot of morphine.

Scott

That was a big relief - I can imagine.

Josh

Yeah. "Oh, man finally! This isn't gonna be that bad, I guess. I finally had some painkillers..." During that time, medics weren't allowed to administer it - I think it was just our unit policy, but

I'm not 100% sure. They did give me a combat pill pack. As we were sitting there, I was staring directly at two corpses in, like, open body bags. They are just, like, blown apart - I don't know if it was our guys or the Iraqis - and I was just staring at them while sitting there trying to get through it.

Scott

What kind of medical facilities were there?

Josh

It's probably the equivalent to like a-- what would you call it?

Scott

Like a walk-in clinic?

Josh

Yeah, thank you. It's definitely something like that. I mean, they definitely have a little bit more because they can do emergency surgery and things like that, but it's pretty small. Usually, for anything that's worse than that, they're just gonna fly you to Balad, which is the main medical hub for Iraq. I'm not sure if they fly everybody - including those from Afghanistan - to Balad, Camp Arifjan, or something.

Scott

Could you have done anything to avoid this? I mean, how much explosive material does it take to destroy a large tank like that?

Josh

Definitely a lot. That one was estimated to be up to 40 pounds of C4 or 400 pounds of homemade explosives like acetylene tanks, propane tanks, fertilizer, or whatever. You can make bombs out of a lot of stuff, but it takes a lot.

Scott

So this wasn't an impulsive thing. Somebody has been working on this for a while and setting this up on the road.

Josh

Most likely, they had been waiting for a long time as well because we didn't roll down that street very often.

Scott

So it's not something you could have spotted and avoided?

Josh

We use a variety of tactics to see where IEDs are - whether it'd be just looking and using scopes. One of the interesting things is they also have, like, ground-penetrating sonar. I don't think we had that at that time, but they have that now. We also use thermals to see where dirt has been disturbed recently because it will be a different color. So, there's nothing that we could have done. We tried everything. They just did it right.

Scott

You're just at the wrong place at the wrong time. So, they brought you back for your immediate treatment. Did you have to fly to the hospital or did they completely treat you there? What happened?

Josh

They stabilized me at the hospital and I was in the ICU eventually. They had taken my foot and then put it in a giant cast to prevent a 'drop foot', which is something that happens when you lose control - it's a really sticky thing that sucks for a lot of people. There wasn't anything really holding-- what's the best way to put this? Well, my heel alone was broken into 10 pieces - the rest of my foot was broken too - so, your Achilles tendon goes down and wraps around your heel. Well, when they pull my foot back, it stretches - it's barely holding on - and becomes very painful suddenly. I felt like there was napalm underneath my skin. The painkiller wasn't enough after that point, so they put me on Dilaudid - hydromorphone is the technical name - which is basically a superstrong morphine. But then, that wasn't enough so they put me on fentanyl - that's the thing that's killing everybody. So, they ended up listening to me, finally - I thought I was gonna rip the head off the damn nurse. They took it off and then they had to put me in the ICU because I was on such a huge quantity of medication that I could have died. Once they finally took it off, they let my foot rest, they kind of made a nested roll out of a blanket, put it down, and took the brace off. Then, I could finally sleep.

Scott

When that happened, how long had you been there? How long was it after the explosion when you could finally rest?

Josh

I kind of lost the concept of time then.

Scott

Was it the same day?

Josh

It was the same day. They couldn't operate because they didn't have hardware or anything like that there. So, they flew me to Balad the next day. Once I got to Balad, they tried to operate again but I had compartment syndrome - which is where the swelling kills off the tissue - all over my foot and whatnot. So, they kind of opened it and cut out all the dead flesh. They couldn't fix anything yet because they didn't have the hardware in my size, essentially, because I have very large feet - size 15. So, they flew us back to another hospital where I had another 2 operations. They still couldn't operate then, so they then flew me to BAMC in San Antonio. That's where I finally got more surgeries. Then, finally, I got my foot fixed.

Scott

So, you're back in the US at this point?

Josh

Yes. It took maybe about 4-5 days, I think?

Scott

Were there any other injuries other than your foot?

Josh

Well, my spine ended up with bulging discs and it's compressed, and my knee had a tear in it. I'm not 100% sure what the result of this was. One of my testicles ended up turning into a giant tumor - I'm not saying it's related to the blast, but it happened during that time. I was wondering if it ruptured and then grew that way. So, I had to have one of my boys taken out. I think that's all.

Scott

So what was your prognosis at this point? Were they just going to somehow fix your foot?

Josh

They're gonna attempt to reconstruct it and get it to a point where it's usable. The goal wasn't going to be pain-free but usable. Fast forward to a year and a half later, I had a total of 13 surgeries on it and it got worse. My toenails are getting torn off when I walk. It's extremely painful. My left leg is shorter than my right. My heel had broken off and I essentially had to walk on the bottom of my ankle now. I had osteomyelitis. My ankle was fused and it was a huge piece of crap. So, I talked to my doctor about having it amputated. I've been recovering for a year and a half, surgery after surgery but I'm seeing these guys who are amputees leaving, like, 3, 6, or 12 months later completely fine and running. I was just like, "Well, what's going on with this foot? This is a piece of crap. Can we do that?" They listened and I had it electively amputated.

Scott

Did any of them advise against amputation? Did they think that they could maybe get it worked out?

Josh

Well, I wouldn't say that they advised against it. A lot of them believe that you should try and keep your body as it is. I mean, the doctor is trying all of his hardest work.

Scott

So, they were trying to get you to not really say, "I should amputate" because they want you to keep the parts that you have. But it kind of sounds like a no-brainer that it was time for the foot to go.

Josh

Yeah, for sure. Because my doctor wouldn't do it at that time, I had to go see the head of orthopedics and he agreed to do it. Then, I walked in to have my leg amputated, which was weird. Fast forward, 2 months later, the next time I saw him after the post op care in the hospital was when I was hanging upside down off a pair of pull-up bars in the rehab facility, and they're like, "Oh, hey! I guess you made the right choice!" I was, like, "Yeah".

Scott

Where was the amputation? Where was the cut line?

Josh

About 6.5 or 7 inches below the knee.

Scott

I've heard there's a huge advantage to having it below the knee as opposed to above the knee.

Josh

For sure. Below the knee is almost, kind of, a rockstar amputation, but it still sucks at times. Overall, it's better.

Scott

You still get the use of your knee anyway.

Josh

Yeah. I mean, I have some really cool legs now above the knee, and it's a lot easier to be below the knee.

Scott

After the amputation, how long do you have to wait before you can be fitted with a prosthetic?

Josh

Usually, I get started in about 2-3 months - I can't remember. I think it was just 2 months, which is another thing that blew my mind, but it makes sense because bone takes longer to heal.

Scott

It seems, like, even after 2 months, it would still be such a major traumatic action on your leg that it would still be sensitive or painful to put pressure on it there.

Josh

It was a little bit, but they're smart and they know that we were probably going to do something stupid. So, for the military guys, they keep our legs at night for the first few weeks so that we don't overdo it.

Scott

Meaning your prosthetics aren't accessible to you because they don't want you going out, running laps, or something.

Josh

Yep. Just doing something stupid, going to the mall without crutches or something like that, and getting stranded because you can't wear your leg anymore. It happened more than you think.

Scott

What was it like the first time you put that prosthetic on?

Josh

To be honest, I was just amazed, I was so excited. I put it on, stood up, and I was like, "Hey, man. This doesn't hurt as bad as my foot did, it was my first time and I was alright. It was pretty intuitive." Since I have my knee, you just kind of get through it. In terms of smoothness in your gait, that's different - that's what all of the physical therapy we did was for. We did it every day, twice a day, for months. I was just so amazed. I was up and walking. There was no sadness. I was just that excited to finally get up and do it.

Scott

Just to be able to walk and not have that pain anymore?

Josh

Yeah.

Scott

It sounds like you adapted to it pretty quickly.

Josh

Two months after that, I was snowboarding and running.

Scott

That's pretty quick!

Josh

I was like, "Wow, why didn't I do this sooner?" So, after amputation, it took a total of about 4-5 months before I was doing that.

Scott

So did you get to the point when you're walking, you're not even thinking, "Okay, I gotta be careful. I gotta step this way." Or was it just instinctive at that point?

Josh

Yes.

Scott

That's pretty fast, then.

Josh

Yeah, there's like some finesse involved. Overall, I didn't think about it at all. It was just pretty natural. The manner in which I walked with my prosthetic was pretty similar to how I was having to walk with my foot anyway.

Scott

Are you the same height as before the explosion?

Josh

Well, mostly. I mean, my spine got shorter - we'll put it that way. Due to the explosion, I have a slight curvature in my back - it's what all unilateral amputees have - just because you favor one side. I mostly lean on my real leg if I'm standing still, or something like that. So, it just kind of does that over time.

Scott

Do you wear the prosthetic at night?

Josh

No.

Scott

Okay. You don't really need it, obviously.

Josh

Yeah. Usually, if I sit on the couch or take my leg off, it's uncomfortable to have your knee bent backwards and have this giant mess of urethane, the sleeve, and the liner sit underneath there.

Scott

What does it feel like when you're just sitting there on a couch watching TV? What does it feel like to be missing part of your leg? I've heard of phantom pain and things like that - do you have that?

Josh

I used to. I still have it occasionally. Mostly, it's just a sensation. I can still wiggle my toes in my head and can move them in my mind. If I close my eyes, it's like they're not gone, in a way, because I can still move them individually. I can still move my foot up and down, and you can see it all move on my stump. I'm not sure how the brain functions. I think we're still trying to figure out why that feeling is still there.

Scott

People that have not experienced it really don't understand what that's like, I'm sure.

Josh

I still feel weird explaining it because I'm not sure if I'm doing it justice or saying it the right way.

Scott

How was dealing with the VA for your medical procedures?

Josh

You mean after I've gotten out?

Scott

Well, throughout the whole time you said you had 13 surgeries.

Josh

I didn't deal with VA during that time. This is an active duty hospital and military treatment facility that was phenomenal. Companies try to get into military hospitals because there are a lot of serious injuries and government funding for it, so it was phenomenal.

Scott

Do you have ongoing treatment now? Are you dealing with the Veterans Administration for medical treatment now?

Josh

Yes, I am now going up to Cleveland for prosthetic care. For my shrink, I go to Akron.

Scott

Alright, let's talk a little bit about that. You mentioned a shrink. Are you dealing with PTSD, depression, or anything like that?

Josh

Yeah. Definitely PTSD. I mean, I'm talking about it today and it's been 10 years since the incident. I'm still having issues with it often. A lot of PTSD changes who you are and tweaks your personality - you don't even realize what's going on anymore. I was wrecked with

depression for years and I ended up hospitalizing myself last year in October for 9 days. Then, I finally got the start of the help that I needed. Now, I'm on a stiff dose of antidepressants.

Scott

Is that effective?

Josh

Yes. Yeah.

Scott

That's good to hear. What's your position on medical marijuana?

Josh

It's a plant that grows in the woods. I don't smoke but it seems common sense to me.

Scott

Have you ever been prescribed that?

Josh

No, we just had it legalized here last year. I still think that they're hammering out some of the issues with it or how it's going to be handled. I know that they just tried and urged the VA to study that as well. I mean, they're also using MDMA for severe cases of PTSD. There are a lot of things out there.

Scott

Yeah, a lot of factors to consider and getting that passed. Yeah.

Josh

We got a lot of brothers and sisters that use it for their mental health needs and stuff like that, and they love it, and they're happy.

Scott

All right. Let's talk about your life after this event. I know you're still dealing with it. Are you on disability now? Do you have ongoing medical treatment for the rest of your life? What's that look like?

Josh

Yeah, I'll be undergoing medical stuff for the rest of my life.

Scott

Can you describe what is your life like now?

Josh

Now, I'm medically retired. I don't have to work but I have jumped between a whole bunch of jobs and stuff like that. I was a depressed wreck - just fell into the bottle for a long time, lost that purpose, and stuff like that. I'm still going to the VA and dealing with a couple of issues with the VA regarding benefits like a traumatic brain injury and things like that. I was going to school for a while, and then I had to back out because I hospitalized myself at that time. These days, it's actually really good. Since then, I have an amazing fiancée. We got our first kid on the way. Things are actually really starting to look up with the medication and everything else.

Scott

Are you able to drive?

Josh

Yep. I mean, it's my left foot. I was always right-footed, so that makes sense. Driving an automatic car is fine, but it's illegal for an amputee to drive a manual car. I may or may not have driven one for a while.

Scott

Well, a lot of people with two regular feet can't drive a stick shift, so you've done pretty well. Do you have plans for another career or anything like that?

Josh

Well, I want to finish my degree in applied mathematics and, hopefully, get into something regarding the space race that's going on between these companies. I really love math. The world is very gray, black, and white, but Math...

Scott

Math is a science.

Josh

Yeah.

Scott

How did the explosion change your outlook on life?

Josh

I mean, I'd smile. It's still something that I struggle with, from time to time - finding purpose, what I want to do, the meaning of life, and whatnot. Everything kind of turned me into more of a pacifist these days. I'm not saying that I would never fight if we were invaded or something like that, but I just don't see the point in doing so unless I absolutely have to. To me, it seems that we tend to stick our business in places where it shouldn't be.

Scott

I think a lot of people feel that way. I hadn't thought about it when we first connected, like, more than a week ago when we decided to have our conversation on, like, next Tuesday - I hadn't realized the significance of today's date as we're recording this - which is September 11. Obviously, it's a big day in our country for the military and everything. So, let me say this - maybe I should have started the show with this - thank you for your service! Do you get a lot of people thanking you when people find out that you were in the military? Did you ever get tired of that?

Josh

I mean, I get people thanking me often, which is great. I think it's good to support the military, even if you don't support the war. So I think people have gotten a lot better about that. To me, I am not good at receiving compliments or gratitude. I mean, I always appreciate and try my best to thank whomever as well, but it's a weird thing for me. I loved the military. I loved what I did. The military gave me purpose and a lot of opportunities, and I'm grateful for the military.

Scott

Do you get comments on your new leg when you're out?

Josh

This one - yes. My other leg is not so much because it looks like the one I had before. This kind of looks like a standard leg, but this one is new. It's made by Ossur and it's called the Cheetah ® Xplore. I think it's pretty strange looking at it.

Scott

In what way?

Josh

It looks like Oscar Pistorius' running legs, but with an entire foot on it. So, I can wear it with normal shoes and things like that. It looks a little bit alien or foreign, but I think it looks kind of cool. I mean, I always thought carbon fiber looked cool anyway.

Scott

And you can run on everything. Is there anything you can't do?

Josh

I can't do moonwalk and calf raises.

Scott

All right. Well, as we're wrapping it up here, there's gonna be people listening to this who are also veterans and possibly amputees - do you have any advice for them? What would you say to someone like that?

Josh

Just don't stop. I know it's hard because I've done it. When you just crumble into your own self and your own depression, you'll stop living your life. So, you got to get started again and you got to stick with it. It's okay to need medication or therapy. I think it's good for everybody just to see a therapist every now and then, whether you're healthy or not. But you can't stop. And if you stopped, you gotta get going. I know it's hard. It's taken me almost 10 years to deal with it. I guess that's it - don't be too proud to ask for help and keep going.

Scott

What was the reaction of your parents or your mom when you first told them that this had happened?

Josh

Well, my mom found out when I was high on Dilaudid right after I got blown up - probably not more than two hours after, I would say. A sergeant major handed me a phone - I remember it was this dinky-ass little phone which is no longer than 3 - 3.5 inches - and he was like, "Okay, you want to call your mom?" I was like, "Sure."

Scott

That seems really fast.

Josh

Yeah. I was like, "Really? I mean, I'm okay. But sure." I didn't know I was gonna be the one telling her what happened with all that noise. The reason I said that comment about the small phone was because it pissed me off - I couldn't talk and hear through it at the same time.

Scott

So you keep moving it back and forth.

Josh

Yeah. I couldn't talk well and I'm, like, slurring. So, my mom answered the phone and I'm like, "Oh, mama. I got blown up!" Then, she's like, "Wait, what? Are you drunk?" "No, mom! I'm not drunk! I got blown up!" Then, she finally understood it and sat down. I don't really remember what I said other than that. I hung up and then got back to it. She's the only person I called. Lo and behold, because I had called her, the army decided that it wasn't important to keep up the communication and to let her know more, because I had already made a phone call. So, she's just in the dark for the next 5 days, pretty much. She ended up freaking out and calling people for hours. She got in touch with a lady from Soldiers' Angels in Germany - this is about 2-3 days later. They asked her, "Does he like anything?" "Yeah. He likes fleece blankets and gummy bears." So, after I got dragged off from the transportation bus into the hospital in Germany, some lady was like, "Are you Josh?" I'm like, "Yeah, who the hell are you?" Then, they got a fleece blanket and a giant bag of gummy bears thrown on me, and I was like, "All right!!!" Right after that, do you know David Baldacci, the author?

Scott

I've heard the name, but I don't know if I've read any of his books. What has he written?

Josh

No clue. I think it's similar to John Grisham or something. He came into my hospital room in Germany, and I was like, "Who the hell are you?" He gave me 2 signed books and some chocolates, and then I was like, "This is the weirdest thing ever."

Scott

That is pretty random. Well, Josh, you've been through a lot. It sounds like you've, at least, been through the worst of it, which I'm glad to hear about. If anyone wants to contact you, I have your email address. I'll put that in the show notes for this episode, along with links to other things that we've talked about here in this conversation. Thanks again for sharing your story!

Josh

Awesome. Thank you, Scott!

Scott

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Scott@whatwasthatlike.com, or just go to the website and click on 'Contact'. I'd love to hear what you think of this episode or a previous episode. Thanks again for listening and I'll see you on the next show where we'll once again ask the question, "What was that like?"