

Military OneSource Podcast — Warrior Games with Army Master Sergeant Ivan Morera

Wounded Warrior Program

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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[Bruce Moody]:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. My guest today is Army Master Sergeant Ivan Morera. As a Special Forces medic, he was wounded during a mission in Afghanistan. We'll hear his story, which includes him competing in the Warrior Games. And we'll talk about resilience and what it took to overcome a life-changing injury. Master Sergeant Ivan Morera, welcome to the podcast.

[Ivan Morera]:

Thank you very much. I'm very honored to be here.

[Bruce Moody]:

Well, we're honored to have you. We've been looking forward to this interview for some time. So let's jump right into it. You joined the Army in 2001, and what I'd like for you to do is to describe those first years. What did you do? And what inspired you to join Army Special Forces?

[Ivan Morera]:

So like you said, I enlisted in 2001. Actually, it was a couple of months before 9/11. I went through basic training. I went through the Combat Medic Course in San Antonio, and I was actually in that course when 9/11 happened. I graduated the course. I was assigned to an infantry battalion at Fort Carson, Colorado, and we ended up deploying to Kuwait for six months. And then we came back, and then about a year later, we were deploying for the Invasion of Iraq. During that deployment, I got to see an actual special forces team come into our firebase. And the 18 Delta, the Special Forces medic, actually came up to our battalion physician's assistant. And I heard them talking and they were talking in medical terms. I was like, "Oh, wow, that's so cool." And I also saw how they had beards. And they had the really cool uniform and the cool combat vest. And I was just like, "Wow, these guys are really cool."

And I asked my PA, "Who are those guys?" "Oh, those are Green Berets." I was like, "Ooh, I want to do that." So we got back from the deployment in 2004, and I spent six months preparing for the Special Forces. And I went in February of 2005. It was a pretty tough three weeks. Went and got through it, and I got selected to be a Special Forces medic 18 Delta. Waited six months, and started the qualification course at Fort Bragg. I spent two years in the Special Forces qualification course. I graduated, and I was assigned to 7th Special Forces Group. So I've enjoyed my career as a Special Forces Green Beret.

[Bruce Moody]:

It's a world unto itself. I think that even those of us who served in uniform, Special Forces is a world unto itself. I do want to talk about your injury, which was on Aug. 16th, 2013. And we spoke before this interview and you said that you would be willing to share this story. And if you are still comfortable with this, I would like you to share the details of that day.

[Ivan Morera]:

Yeah, absolutely. Actually speaking about it is very cathartic for me, and I let go of a lot of anxiety and other things I'm holding every time I speak about it. So I'm always open whenever anybody asks me. So 2013, I'm on a ODA 7434, and we're conducting combat operations with the Afghani Commandos, which is their version of Rangers. Aug. 16, 2013, we're conducting a convoy to conduct an operation when an Taliban insurgent on a motorcycle came up to my driver's side tire. I was actually driving the vehicle. And I could see the printing of the suicide vest on him. So I went ahead and moved away from him to the right, and he followed me. And I went ahead and moved away again. And on the fourth time I moved away, I actually came off the road. So I went ahead and tried to get back on the road, and however, I lost control of the vehicle and my vehicle flipped.

The guys in the vehicle behind me told me our vehicle flipped four times, and on the first flip, my driver's side door actually broke off and shot like a hundred meters in front of the truck. And during that I was knocked unconscious. I was strapped in with a five-point harness, which actually saved my life. But I was knocked unconscious, so my arms were just flaring around. And on the fourth roll we landed, and my left hand was crushed between the vehicle and the ground. I don't know how long I was unconscious for. I woke up and I saw what was left of my hand, and I called out to my team sergeant who was in the passenger seat, "My hand, my hand." So he unbuckled himself. He tried to pull me out, but I was stuck. So he cut off my body armor. He disconnected the harness and called in my junior medic, because I was a senior medic on the team.

And he comes in, and I had two tourniquets put on me. One by my team sergeant and one by the junior medic. And he's like, "Hey, Ivan, I got to cut what's left of your hand to pull you out." And I just told him, "Just get me out of here." So he took out his trauma shears and cut what was left of my hand, and they pulled me out. And I was going in out of consciousness. I could feel them pulling me out of the vehicle. I could feel myself laying on the litter. And I remember waking up saying, "What happened? What happened?" And I saw what was left of my arm, and it was very traumatic. I was like, "Where's the bird?" Where's the helicopter, as we say. One of my teammates was like, "Hey, five mics out, five mics out. Five minutes." And I go unconscious again.

I just remember feeling the rotor wash on my face, and I could feel my teammate covering my face with his body as the helicopter landed. And then I just remember waking up in the hospital in Kandahar, just looking at what was left of my arm. It was really hard to look at. I just remember crying, being upset. My teammates being there, "Hey, Ivan, you're going to be okay. You're going to go home. You're going to be okay. We'll see you when we get home." My battalion commander, sergeant major and the chaplain were there, encouraging me. "You'll be fine, you'll be okay." And then with that, it wasn't just me injured. It was me, the EOD tech and the gunner in the truck were all injured, and we were all medevacked out of there. And immediately after the medevac, that insurgent came around and detonated himself, and injured several other people on my team.

My team sergeant caught a lot of shrapnel to his right leg. He actually almost lost his leg, but he was medevacked out as well. We ended up at the hospital in Kandahar together. A couple of other guys were injured. One guy took shrapnel to the abdomen. He lost about 12 inches of intestine. Nobody died that day, but it was a rough day for those teams. I just remember waking up and it was just hard. Right then, it was just shocking to me. And then I was transferred over to another hospital in Bagram. I was there for 24 hours and then transferred to Landstuhl in Germany. So I ended up flying out to San Antonio, and I was there for 10 months.

[Bruce Moody]:

Amazing. So you're at the Brook Army Medical Center. What were your first days like?

[Ivan Morera]:

The first day was just a blur. I just remember doctors coming in and taking a look at me, but it was the second night there was the hardest. I started realizing, "Oh my gosh..." And I was left-handed. So I just remember, "Oh my gosh, I just lost my left hand." And I had started feeling sorry for myself. I was like, "Oh my gosh, what am I going to do? How am I going to support my family? How am I going to live this way?" And then, I'm a man of faith, so I remember hearing a voice in my head saying, "Ivan, it's okay. I got you." And I knew right there I was going to be good. So at that time, I just started making goals. And this is like two, three in the morning because I couldn't sleep. Because my personal time, if you will, I was still set on Afghani time.

I was just in a lot of pain. I couldn't sleep. So I was like, "You know what? I'm just going to make goals." So I was like, "Okay, tomorrow morning I'm just going to go walk around the floor. And then the next day I'm going to go do a workout. And then the next day I'm going to go walk outside." I just started making these small, short-term goals. And then I was like, "Okay, what are we going to do in six months?" I was like, "Okay, I'm going to be in physical therapy. I'm going to go home, and I'm going to redeploy with a team." That really didn't happen, but it was a goal I had set for myself so I could plan how I was going to reach that goal. Then I made a year-long goal, a five-year goal.

I just started making goals so I had something to reach for, I had purpose, I wasn't just going to sit around and feel sorry for myself. I was going to get better. I was not going to let this beat me. I was like, "Hey, me and the Man are going to do it together." And 10 years later, here I am as an adaptive military athlete now, but it was just about setting goals those first couple of days.

[Bruce Moody]:

And when you say that you're an adaptive military athlete, we're referring to the Warrior Games, which you just very recently competed in. How did that start for you? When did you first hear of the Warrior Games? And when did you decide that it was time for you to compete or appropriate for you to compete, in these games?

[Ivan Morera]:

I spent about eight years after my injury working on being operational, being able to deploy, being able to conduct missions. And then about somewhere in 2020, and my time on the teams were done. And I was like, "Man, what am I going to do?" And I had a sergeant major say, "Hey, there's an opening for the Warrior Care Program. They need a noncommissioned officer in charge for one of their regions." And I was like, "Oh, I'll take that job." So I took the job as the southern region NCOIC, and I found out about adaptive sports. And I saw that there are all kinds of sports. I had been an athlete most of my teenage and early 20s. Wrestling, judo, jiu-jitsu, things like that I was competing in tournaments and practicing. And now that I was a bit older and with the injury, I was like, "Man, I could do this. I can do indoor rowing, I can do archery, I can play seated volleyball. I can do these. I can do these.

So I was invited to a training camp down at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa. I actually tried out for almost every sport, but I really fell in love with rowing and archery. Those are my two favorite individual sports. And I remember playing beach volleyball as a young man, and I really enjoyed playing volleyball as a team sport. So I was like, "Hey, these are the sports I want to do." And then I got into field sports, shot put and discus. I had never done that. And the field coach was like, "Hey, you want to give it a shot?" I was like, "Yeah, I'll give it a shot." So I'm competing in that as well. So I was just open to almost any sport just to do something, just to have purpose again.

Because once I left the teams, I was like, "Man, what am I going to do? How am I going to occupy my free time?" So now I just train to compete in these adaptive sporting events, like the Warrior Games. I competed in the 2021 Warrior Games Virtual Challenge. I competed in the actual Warrior Games at Disney last year, in 2022. And then I competed this year in the Warrior Games Challenge in San Diego. And I had a great time because part of being a Green Beret, is you're on a 12-man team and you build this brotherhood, this camaraderie with all the guys on your team. And it's about not yourself, but it becomes about your brother, to your left and right, and what are you going to do to help them succeed? What are you going to do to bring them home from combat? So when I was selected to join Team SOCOM, I had that feeling again.

Like, "Man, I'm on a team again. I have brothers and sisters now that I can relate to and talk to." And I just got that sense of family again. So I was like, "Man, I really like this. This is what I want to do till I retire." So now that being on Team SOCOM has been a great honor, because I've got to meet a bunch of other service members. I've got to meet a couple of Navy SEALs, a couple of Rangers. So it's really cool to talk to them and train with them, and just conduct sports. And just meet their families and get to know them personally.

[Bruce Moody]:

To a degree is the community itself, what is that community able to provide you that the rest of us are not?

[Ivan Morera]:

You build this camaraderie, this closeness, this brotherhood with the other guys. You become family with their families and they become family with your family. And I kind of lost that a little bit. And then now that I'm on Team SOCOM, I have that again. I have that closeness with other guys who are injured as well, because we can relate to each other. When somebody's having a bad day, "Hey, come on, suck it up buttercup. Let's go, we got to train." We can talk to each other like that, because we can relate. If anybody else talked to me like that, I wouldn't be very happy about it. But I can have another Green Beret, Navy SEAL, Army Ranger, MARSOC operator, it doesn't bother me because you know what, we're so much alike. It's like, "Yeah, okay, you're right. You know what? I'll stop feeling sorry for myself. Let's go. Let's get on the court. Let's get on the rower." Things like that, I can relate to them better.

[Bruce Moody]:

Help me through understanding the games themselves. Specifically, I'm really interested in the competition. Because when you're on the rower, it's about delivering your personal best. You're just giving it everything. But I'm interested in your thoughts about competing with other athletes. Because you're in this community, you're supporting each other, but then you get on the court and you're in competition with each other. What does that competition and that brotherhood look like and feel like during the games?

[Ivan Morera]:

So the games play a big part in the recovery of, I would say, all of the service members from each branch. We're all brothers and sisters in arms. We've all raised our right hand and swore to protect this country. So that creates a bond between us. But then, when you're on the court, or you're on the rower, or you're on the archery field, now it's like, "Okay, it's competition time. Hey, these guys are great, but I got to do what I got to do to win." And it's just a personal thing because especially in special operations, we're highly competitive. We always want to be the best at what we do. And that's why we're constantly training and honing our skills. On the field, on the court, on the rower, it's like, "Hey, I got to do what I got to do to represent my branch, bring home the gold for them."

But after the games, it's like, "Hey, come on over here, Marine. Let me give you a hug." Stuff like that. We become brothers and sisters again. And just like with any other family, you got people you get along with and people you don't. But it just builds that sense of family and camaraderie. Because there's something about being in the military that bonds people together. Whatever you might do, whether you're a special operator, whether you're a support service member, it doesn't matter. We all raised our right hand and swore to protect this country. So that's what we have in common, and I just enjoy being around other service members and veterans.

[Bruce Moody]:

I would like, as an aside, to discuss wheelchair rugby.

[Ivan Morera]:

Sure.

[Bruce Moody]:

Because I just encourage people to... You can go online and watch these games, and probably the epitome of what it means to compete and support a brotherhood. There's nothing more, frankly, amazing than wheelchair rugby. I mean, just the concept alone. I encourage people, but can you describe what this sport is? And how people both compete and support each other when they're engaged in this sport?

[Ivan Morera]:

Sure. So wheelchair rugby is rugby played obviously in a wheelchair. Rules are kind of different, but it's a fast, explosive, violent sport. We got people bashing each other with the wheelchairs. The object obviously is to take the ball and get it across the goal line. And there's different tactics and techniques that we use against our opponents. But it's just that feeling like, "I'm going to get this dude." Just because, just like if anybody plays American football, it's like, "Hey, you got to hit them hard." And it's just about getting hit and hitting him back. But there's no animosity, there's no anger after the game. It's just a good, hard-fought game. And it builds that brotherhood and that sisterhood among the service members, because it's like, "Man, you hit me good, man." "No, no, you hit me harder."

Just like that. And I've had the opportunity to play for Team SOCOM. I played for Team SOCOM this year, and I got a couple of hits in. I got hit a bunch of times, but it's fun. It's like, "Man, that guy hit me hard. That's pretty cool." It's just building that family on the court, especially with the team you're playing with. You're like, "Hey, he hit my buddy. I got to get him back."

[Bruce Moody]:

I absolutely encourage people to just have a look at this sport. It'll sort of be your gateway to the Warrior Games and then you'll be hooked.

[Ivan Morera]:

Yeah, that's the most popular team sport.

[Bruce Moody]:

Yeah. Let me transition. The Warrior Games is not necessarily a celebration of the completion of your rehabilitation, your building back. It's more of a process. As you are continuing to work through your goals, short-term and long, I'd really like to hear your thoughts on resilience, and what this concept means to you.

[Ivan Morera]:

Yeah, that's a good question. I think it just starts with the person. It's like, "What do I want to change in my life? How bad do I want to reach this goal? What do I need to get to where I'm going? Who can I turn to for help?" That's the first step is like, "Hey, I need help." You get the help you need, and then you start developing a plan like, "Hey, you know what? I just want to get out of bed this morning. Hey, you know what? Let's just sit up on the bed. Just take steps. You know what? Let's go ahead and walk to the kitchen, and let's make ourselves a cup of coffee. Okay, let's do that. Let's go outside. Hey, I went outside. Let's take a walk." You have to want it. You have to want your life be better. You just got to want it.

That's how I look at it. You have to get out of whatever hole you're in. You have to start climbing. And you got to reach and call for help, because there are people that will get in the hole with you and push you out. And I've been very fortunate to have family that have been very supportive, teammates that have been very supportive and a lot of friends that have been supportive to get me to where I'm at today.

[Bruce Moody]:

I think that's the message, and I think that we'll end on that note. Army Master Sergeant Ivan Morera. Thank you so very much for joining us today.

[Ivan Morera]:

Thank you. It's been an honor. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story. And hopefully what we've talked about helps somebody out there to take a turn for the better in their life.

[Bruce Moody]:

I also hope for the same. Thank you. The honor is ours as well. Thank you. And, want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. And we hope to hear from you. If there's something that you heard today that you'd like to leave a message, if you have a question for us, there's a link in the program notes. And you can go and send us a note. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening today. Take care. Bye-bye.