



Amputations increase with surge in Afghanistan



Marine Cpl. Tyler Southern celebrates Aug. 20 after his arrival at his Jacksonville home. Southern was awarded a Purple Heart after he lost both legs and an arm to an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan.

October 2010

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

The number of U.S. soldiers who have suffered amputations in Afghanistan has increased sharply over last year as more troops move into Taliban territory, according to Army data.

Amputations rose from 47 in 2009 to 77 through Sept. 23 of this year, or an increase of more than 60%, the Army reports.

The chief cause of the injuries are improvised explosive devices — or IEDs — that are planted in the ground or along roads, according to the International Security Assistance Force, which oversees military operations in Afghanistan.

Coalition forces have been hit by more IEDs in recent weeks as the surge in U.S. troops allows for expanded operations into traditional Taliban strongholds in Kandahar and Helmand provinces in southern Afghanistan.

"The patients survive only because (of) the wearing of body armor," along with the use of tourniquets in the field and rapid evacuation to a hospital by helicopter, said Navy Cmdr. Eric Elster, lead surgeon at a NATO hospital outside Kandahar City.

The vast majority of amputations involve the loss of either an arm or leg, but a dozen soldiers this year have had multiple amputations, twice the number of such cases in 2009.

At the NATO hospital, doctors amputated a major limb — a leg or arm — an average of once every other day in September, according to Navy Capt. Michael Mullins, a hospital spokesman. The operations included not only U.S. troops, but also NATO troops, Afghan soldiers and civilians, Mullins said.

A recent Pentagon report said IEDs are now the "the most serious threat" to coalition forces, killing 6,200 allied and Afghan troops in fiscal year 2009, compared with 3,800 in 2008.

The surge in reinforcements ordered by President Obama and subsequent military operations in Taliban strongholds have led to the "highest rate of IED attacks" since the war began in 2001, the Pentagon report said.

Deaths among U.S. troops in Afghanistan this year reached 531 in September, surpassing the 514 Americans killed in 2009.

Even with the increase in combat, the number of amputations among U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan is less than half of those GIs who lost limbs in Iraq at the height of that war. There were 207 soldiers who became amputees because of war wounds suffered in Iraq in 2007, according to Army statistics, the worst year for that type of casualty in the Iraq fighting.

However, the percentage of major amputations (loss of a leg or arm) is higher this year among the Army casualties in Afghanistan than any year in Iraq. In Afghanistan, 90% of Army amputees lost a major limb; in Iraq, that figure never exceeded 80%, according to Army statistics.

<http://www.usatoday.com/>