Trials and tribulations lead to triumph

by Airman 1st Class Michaela R. Slanchik
509th Bomb Wing Public Affairs

9/21/2015 - WHITEMAN AIR FORCE BASE, Mo. -- On Aug. 16, 2011, an Airman was working with a group of U.S. Army Soldiers while deployed to Panjwaii, Afghanistan. At around seven that morning, the Airman's patrol came under fire. While defending themselves, the foot patrol proceeded into town to regroup with their main element.

Before the patrol made it to their rallying point, the Airman was shot through the wrist.

Tech. Sgt. David Hernandez, 509th Logistics Readiness Squadron NCO in charge of resource management, returned from Afghanistan in 2011 with an injury that changed his life, and qualified him as a wounded warrior.

Hernandez, now a Purple Heart recipient, went to physical therapy for more than a year after being shot. He eventually regained about 50 percent of the movement in his left wrist.

"Physical therapy was fun," said Hernandez. "After being told I wouldn't get my movement back, I took my bow and arrow in and measured the degree for what I needed to shoot it again. That was my goal for physical therapy, to have 12 degrees of movement. I got there after a year and a half. Everything else just came with me slowly working out and stretching."

Every year, the Wounded Warrior Project sends out a list of activities and events to participate in. One of the activities listed this year was a tournament that allows veterans and service members with physical and/or visual disabilities to select events in which to compete.

When Hernandez received the email, he decided to take on the challenge. After choosing the events he would compete in, he began training six days a week.

"You pick three different events," said Hernandez. "They're set up for your disability. No matter the disability that you have, there is an event you can participate in."

Last month, Hernandez competed against other wounded warriors and placed in two out of three of his events.

The competition tested his skill in power lifting, shot put and archery. There was nearly a tie in the power lifting competition, but Hernandez took the gold. He also earned third place in archery.

"The second place winner for this year's power lifting competition had been going there every year, taking it with ease," said Hernandez. "I was glad to give him some tough competition."

Eileen Hawkins, 509th Logistics Readiness Squadron operation compliance manager, said she believed the games would be a piece of cake for Hernandez due to his preparation and how he consistently strives for excellence.

"With his determination, I had no doubt that he would be in the top three," said Hawkins. "He is committed to achieving the goals he sets for himself."

The games weren't strictly competition; the warriors also had the opportunity to learn a lot from each other.

"There were wounded warriors from every war imaginable," said Hernandez. "They all had different injuries,
stories and attitudes. It seemed a lot of the competitors lived for the games. I think it's important to get everyone together so the wounded warriors realize they're not the only ones going through everything they're going through. We're not alone.

Hernandez said the games give competitors healthy competition, friendships that last a lifetime and more importantly, they give some a reason to live.

Hawkins said she believes that the competition has helped him improve his job performance.

"Being able to prepare for and participate in these games added to his discipline which carried over to his job performance," said Hawkins. "He has improved his work performance and overall morale by accomplishing goals."

While some may avoid certain activities due to such an injury, Hernandez does not let his wrist hinder him.

"He is willing to take on any task assigned to him and see it through," said Hawkins. "He does not say that he can't do something because of his injury."

Hernandez said he believes the competition has inspired him in many ways.

He now has plans to get more involved with other events that help veterans who went through similar situations during their service. He is also looking to give back by helping at a post-traumatic stress disorder camp at the end of the year and plans to compete in more competitions.

"It gave him a goal and something to work towards," said Hawkins. "He strives to do his best and it shows."