

Weapons training system gets troops back to shooting

FRED BAKER III

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON – Marine Lance Corporal Eric Frazier, a reservist out of Nashville, thought his life had stopped – not when his Humvee was hit by a bomb in Iraq last year, but when he woke up and saw his arm in a cast and his legs gone.

For the lanky country boy who had hunted the hills of Tennessee since he was old enough to carry a Red Ryder BB gun, being outside – in the woods, walking the trails – was his life.

“The first thing I woke up and I seen my arm was in a big ol’ Styrofoam holder thing and I had lost my legs I was like, ‘I’m just not going to be able to shoot,’” Frazier said.

“Your life kind of stops. You’re like, ‘What am I going to now?’” he said.

But across the street from the bustling physical and occupational therapy rooms at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here, there is a small metal building where Frazier was able to learn to shoot again and to gain at least that part of his life back.

The Fire Arms Training System is part of occupational therapy at the center. It teaches servicemembers how to adjust to their injuries and how to fire military weapons despite new limitations. A computer system runs scenarios and servicemembers fire a variety of electronically integrated weapons at a large screen. The results are digitally tallied in a computer and progress is charted.

With its combat-based scenarios, the

system helps some feel like Soldiers and Marines again, but for Frazier and others who grew up shooting, it also provides an opportunity to feel normal again.

The program was the first therapeutic program with fire arms for military medicine, program manager Barry Yancosek said.

“From the research that we’ve done, we’re using the best system to provide the most advanced therapy that the military is offering with firearms,” he said.

Until recently, Walter Reed was the only site offering the program, but now the newly opened Center for the Intrepid at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, also offers the same therapy.

The program started as a pilot in June 2005, costing about \$100,000. The Fire Arms Training System is a commercial program sold worldwide. Each software package is tailored for the purchaser. The Army’s qualification standards and pop-up target ranges are built into the program for the center, as well as some video-based combat scenarios.

Patients start with basic marksmanship training and practice shooting a “zero,” or a close three-round shot grouping, then move on to the Army standard pop-up target lanes.

Yancosek said he initially wanted to see if Soldiers suffering upper extremity injuries could learn to re-qualify with their weapons, a basic common task in the Army.

After 10 hours of training using the system, the first patients participating showed a 30 percent increase in their



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Marine Lance Cpl. Eric Frazier, a reservist from Nashville, Tenn., fires a 9-mm pistol electronically tied into the Fire Arms Training System. In the background, program manager Barry Yancosek runs a combat-based scenario that helps severely injured servicemembers feel like Soldiers and Marines again.

overall score, hitting an average of 90 percent of the targets. Only one in the program failed to qualify to the Army standard, Yancosek said.

An avid outdoorsman for more than 30 years, Yancosek said he found hunting was a common interest among most of the shooters. That led to taking groups of patients on hunting trips as part of their occupational therapy.

“A lot of these young men were hunters long before they said ‘I do’ to the service, so it was a natural progression for them to want to go out and hunt,” Yancosek said.

In the past two years, groups of

patients have gone on many hunts, including duck, goose, elk, antelope, turkey and deer hunts, he said.

“That’s the awesome thing about this,” Frazier said. “It lets me know that ... I can still shoot even like I am now, and I’m not even healed yet.”

Frazier has bought parts to make his own rifle. A competitive shooter before he joined the Marine Corps, Frazier was the top shot in his company at boot camp. Despite his injuries, he plans to return to the land owned by his great grandmother and return to the sport he loves.

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