

Grace Under Fire

By Rob Lewis



PHOTO : LUCIEN CAPEHARTY/GETTY IMAGES

It almost seemed unfair.

J. R. Martinez won the 13th season of ABC's hit series "Dancing with the Stars" with the grace and confidence of a professional dancer.

But on that night, what was past turned out to be prologue. Martinez's harrowing experience as a severely burned victim of an ambush in Iraq paved the way to a role on a daytime TV drama followed by his dance-show victory.

"If he didn't break after surviving that ambush and those terrible burns, he certainly wasn't going to be broken by any other challenge life has to offer," said National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. "It is that preference and his willingness to become the face of a generation of wounded veterans that

we want to honor."

The honor Wilson mentions is the 2012 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award. Martinez, whose nomination was put forward by the Department of California, will officially receive the award Aug. 4 at the DAV National Convention in Las Vegas.

"Receiving this award from such a prominent group like DAV is almost like receiving a medal for some amazing work I didn't get a chance to continue to do in the military," said Martinez.

Born in Shreveport, La., in 1983 and raised mostly in Dalton, Ga., Martinez enlisted in the Army infantry in 2002. He took part in the invasion of Iraq as part of 1st Platoon, Delta Co., 2/502nd Battalion, 2nd Brigade in the storied 101st Airborne Division out of

J.R. Martinez and Past National Commander Dennis Joyner attend Lady in Red Gala to benefit The American Veterans Disabled For Life Memorial.



J.R. joined the military at 19 as a U. S. Army infantryman.

Ft. Campbell, Ky.

“I enlisted in the Army for many reasons. After 9/11, I felt like it gave me an opportunity to give back to a country that had given so much to my family, who are from El Salvador,” Martinez said. “Of course, it also gave me an opportunity to earn college money, be more independent and travel the world.”

Fellow soldier Justin Hart, who now serves as National Service Office Supervisor in Hartford, Conn., remembers his impression of Martinez more than a decade after their first meeting.

“He was a great soldier with a high work ethic,” Hart said. “I remember having a brief couple of

days before we received the orders to invade Iraq. Our leaders were going through different scenarios to see how we would react if someone got shot or blown up. JR said he would run in and get them no matter what because these soldiers were like a second family to him.

“Of course, the answer our supervisors were looking for was to secure the area first. It didn’t matter to him. He was going in to help no matter what.”

After the invasion, Martinez, Hart and the rest of their unit began the long, arduous process of securing Iraq, city by city. But in Karbala, Martinez’s brief military career would come to an end when the

Humvee he was driving was hit by a roadside bomb during a security patrol.

Hart, who was manning the .50 caliber machine gun turret atop the vehicle, has a vivid, if fragmented, version of what happened next.

“I remember waking up on the concrete road. I had no idea of what just took place,” Hart said. “I felt this immense amount of heat coming from the right side of me and someone yelling in the background. I could not make out what it was they were yelling, so I looked in the direction. I saw this rubble of metal on fire. I was so close to the fire, it was burning the hairs on my body. I

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PHOTO: DISNEY/ABC



PHOTO: KEWAN BROOKS/ADMEDIA

Left, Karina Smirnoff and J.R. Martinez win on “2011 Dancing with the Stars.” Above, Martinez, center, joins Hollywood entertainment studios, television networks, talent agencies and guilds to launch “Got Your 6,” a collective action initiative dedicated to creating opportunities for veterans in six categories: jobs, education, housing, health, family and leadership.

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looked to my left to try to move away from the vehicle and my .50 caliber machine gun landed within three feet of me at that moment. The barrel was bent in half, which in my three years of service I have never seen anything like that happen to a barrel of a .50 caliber machine gun. I looked up and my platoon sergeant was yelling for me to come in his direction. By this time the grenades, MK-19 rounds, and .50 caliber rounds were all cooking off. I could hear the rounds coming [within] inches of my body. I got up to go in the direction of my platoon sergeant, and fell to the ground. I could not walk. He came over and picked me up and brought me to safety behind another truck.

“The entire time I heard JR yelling in the background. My platoon sergeant and a squad leader rushed to pull him from the wreckage. They tried to grab him, but his skin was sliding off of his body. Eventually, they pulled him out, and we were brought to a medevac location, where we were transported out together on a UH-60 helicopter. I remember that I was under him listening to him scream. I did my best to assure him that everything was going to be all right. I’m not sure if he heard me when I was talking with him because of the pain he was in,” Hart said.

Severely burned on more than 40 percent of his body and suffering from smoke inhalation, Martinez was flown to an Army hospital in Germany, then to Walter Reed and finally Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio. He spent nearly three years at the hospital, enduring 33 surgeries and skin grafts.

The course of treatment was grueling and painful, but Martinez made the decision early on that he would not give up.

“Any self-pity I had didn’t last. My mother talking to me snapped me out of it,” Martinez said. “Most of all, I had a belief that there had to be more to life than what I had experienced. I had to make the choice to live to see just how much more there was for me.”

Hart, who suffered a broken leg among other injuries in the blast, was eventually able to return to the fight with his fellow soldiers in Iraq. When they returned to Ft. Campbell, the soldiers had a special visitor waiting for them.

“JR was there to greet us despite the treatments he was undergoing for his injuries,” Hart said. “My heart dropped when I saw him again. He was crying and hugging everyone. It was a very emotional event.”

During his recovery at BAMC, Martinez was asked by a nurse to speak with a fellow burn patient whose outlook wasn’t as focused and positive. Martinez soon discovered that he had a mission again—through public speaking he could motivate others to see through the fog of their circumstances and achieve greatness.

“I try to drive home motivation, realization and determination to my audiences,” Martinez said.

In 2008, he was cast in ABC’s “All My Children” in the role of combat-injured Iraq veteran Brot Monroe.

After his run ended on the show, Martinez was able to parlay the appearance into the role he seemed destined to star in—playing himself on the dancing-themed reality show “Dancing with the Stars,” which requires hard work, grace under pressure, good looks and confidence.

Martinez and dancing partner Karina Smirnoff won the competition in rousing fashion, along the way bringing attention to those who suffer the wounds of war.

“It was thrilling to tune into ‘Dancing with the Stars’ and see JR, a disabled veteran, one of our very own, showing the world that there is nothing we cannot accomplish,” said National Commander Donald Samuels. “It must be a tremendous amount of pressure on a young man, but he has taken the duty of role model very seriously and is doing all veterans proud.”

Indeed, Martinez acknowledges the difficulties of being the face of a generation of disabled veterans for a large segment of America, but he accepts it.

“I’ve grown to become very comfortable in the role; I accept the challenge,” Martinez said. “In my mind, I don’t just represent myself. I represent all veterans. And I know that they are out there building their own lives and writing their own stories to represent me.”

Hart believes the recognition for Martinez as DAV’s Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year is a continuation of the story of a great soldier.

“This inspiring young man sets an example for all of us,” said Wilson. “His determination to carry on despite adversity and to deliver a message of hope to others is in keeping with the highest traditions of DAV.”