

# Combat Soldier Brings Expertise to DCMA Atlanta Through *Hire a Hero* Program



by Ms. Bernice Keith, Administrative Contracting Office, DCMA Atlanta

**A**rmy Sgt. James Lee Kirchner is a soldier from Douglasville, Ga., in the Georgia Army National Guard's 48<sup>th</sup> Brigade Combat Team and an Iraq war hero. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a hero as “**c**: a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities or **d**: one that shows great courage.”<sup>1</sup> Sgt. Kirchner meets both definitions.

Sgt. Kirchner's outstanding military track record coupled with his educational background and professional experience made him a prime candidate for the Defense Contract Management Agency's (DCMA's) *Hire a Hero* program, which is designed to facilitate a smooth transition from military to civilian employment for veterans who have been wounded in military service. DCMA Atlanta Commander Army Col. Jesse Stone and Deputy Commander Ms. Vivian Hill have been actively recruiting wounded war veterans who are eligible for the program. Col. Stone's recruiting goal was to find someone whom he could assist in making a positive life change. To find the candidate most suited for the program, Col. Stone sought “to provide a no-cost, win-win opportunity [for] one or two recuperating wounded veterans living in the Atlanta area that might result in a permanent position with DCMA,” he explained. “The soldiers win because they [learn about] how DCMA supports

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the warfighter and gain knowledge about exercising the skills that are necessary to succeed. DCMA wins by leveraging valuable weapon systems knowledge and experience possessed by these soldiers at no cost to the Agency.”

Sgt. Kirchner's journey from military to civilian employment began June 12, 2005, when he was wounded near Baghdad, Iraq, by an insurgent mortar attack. After five surgeries, parts of Sgt. Kirchner's neck, right arm and right hand remain paralyzed. His medical records indicate he can no longer carry a weapon or even salute, and he is advised to lift or carry no

more than five pounds at once. Although he can walk, he still hurts, sometimes intensely.

Sgt. Kirchner remembers many details about the mortar attack. It was his third day at Forward Operating Base Michael, about 20 miles south of Baghdad. He had just finished night guard duty. He took off his body armor and helmet and lay in his cot half asleep. Some time that morning, a mortar round exploded just outside his tent, spraying his back, shoulders, right arm and head with shrapnel. The deafening blast threw him to the floor. He glanced around and tried unsuccessfully to raise himself off the floor. He was injured too badly. “My back was shredded. My arm was just bleeding like a pig,” Sgt.

<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster OnLine, “hero,” 2006, Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 18 July 2006, <<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/hero>>.

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Kirchner recalls. "I was screaming, 'I'm hit! I'm hit! Medic! Medic!'"

Army Staff Sgt. Joe Wilson was also in the tent during the attack. He and other soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 108<sup>th</sup> Armor Regiment rushed to Sgt. Kirchner's aid. "I couldn't hear anything because my ears had been blasted," Staff Sgt. Wilson explained in a telephone interview from Iraq. "I had temporary hearing loss. The tent was full of smoke and dust. [Sgt. Kirchner] was screaming in pain and bleeding, and I reached for my vest to throw over him to protect him from what else was going to happen." Staff Sgt. Wilson then joined Sgt. Kirchner in yelling for medics. Help arrived in less than a minute.



When Sgt. Kirchner returned to the U.S. for treatment at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., his wife, Cynthia, stayed by his bedside. She put her hands on his wounded body and prayed. "It is a miracle he survived," she said. "It is a true blessing."

During his military career, Sgt. Kirchner managed operations as a team leader, chemical officer, commander's driver and gunner, and he served in various other key positions. He always displayed outstanding professionalism and integrity, exceptional personal conduct and sound judgment in all aspects of his assigned duties. In August 2005 he was awarded the Purple Heart Medal. Other decorations he has earned include the Army Commendation Medal (First Oak Leaf Cluster), Combat Action Badge, National Defense Specialty Medal, Air Assault Badge and Army Achievement Medal, as well as numerous others.

Sgt. Kirchner, who graduated from The Pennsylvania State University with a bachelor's degree in information systems and the Officer Candidate School at Pennsylvania National Guard Military Academy, is currently assigned to DCMA Atlanta's Operations Group. The assignment will bring him full circle as

he observes how DCMA supports the warfighter. Currently, he is sharpening his technical skills by taking several training courses offered through Defense Acquisition University. His short-term goals include participating in an array of shadowing assignments, which will enable him to see firsthand how DCMA operates and interfaces with the customer. His long-term goals include landing a position in DCMA's Keystone Intern Program working as a product assurance specialist and/or small arms weapons inspector. Such positions will match his qualifications and best utilize his technical knowledge and military expertise, resulting in a mutually beneficial arrangement for him and DCMA.

Sgt. Kirchner is currently retained on active duty status and is receiving ongoing medical treatment and physical therapy at a local medical facility while working at DCMA Atlanta. With the support of his family, including his four children Dustin, 19; Hillary, 15; Jesup, 12; Andrew, 6; and another little one on the way, Sgt. Kirchner is excited about this opportunity and the beginning of a new chapter in his journey. He believes the *Hire a Hero* program is an excellent way to recognize the sacrifice of our war heroes.



**(Top)** Army Sgt. James Lee Kirchner, a soldier from the Georgia Army National Guard's 48<sup>th</sup> Brigade Combat Team and an Iraq war veteran, is currently assigned to DCMA Atlanta's Operations Group.

**(Right)** Sgt. Kirchner's Purple Heart Medal, which he was awarded in August 2005 for near-fatal wounds received in action in Iraq.