

NGA Salute: SGT. RAFAEL SALDANA, USMC

'WOUNDED WARRIOR' GAINS NEW SKILLS, HOPE FOR FUTURE AS NGA INTERN

By Rachael Groseclose, Analysis Directorate



Photo courtesy of Sgt. Rafael Saldana

MARINE CORPS SGT. RAFAEL SALDANA WAS medically retired Jan. 30 after six years and a deployment to Afghanistan that resulted in a life-altering head injury.

His road to recovery included a six-month internship at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency that provided career-broadening opportunities and a renewed sense of hope for the future, he said.

Despite the challenges, Saldana is grateful for the journey – and he would do it all again, he said.

“Before I came to NGA, I thought I was going to have a huge challenge because of my injuries, but that hasn’t been the case,” said Saldana. “I gained a new career and skill set, but I also gained a sense of hope for the future. This proved I could still serve my country and do more than I thought I could.”

After sustaining a head, brain and compressed spinal injury during combat in 2010 as a machine gunner, Saldana sought assistance through the Intelligence Community Wounded Warrior Program – a Department of Defense Operation Warfighter initiative that places wounded, ill and injured service members in supportive work settings during recuperation.

His recovery didn’t take place immediately, he said.

“I didn’t want my injuries to hinder me, so I didn’t seek help right away,” said Saldana. “But my command recommended I get help and advised me to go to the Wounded Warrior Program for transitioning.”

He took his command’s advice. After attending an IC Wounded Warrior Internship Fair at NGA’s Springfield, Va., campus in August 2013, he was selected for an internship with the agency’s Analysis directorate.

“I had an idea of what I wanted to do,” he said. “I wanted to stay as close to combat as I could. I wanted to keep serving.”

He was aware of the challenges he might encounter because of his injuries and his lack of an imagery background, he said. To bolster his knowledge, he took a basic imagery course with Larry Orndoff, whom Saldana connected with as a mentor.

“My mentor has been so patient,” said Saldana. “He’s so knowledgeable and knows how to approach things so people have a basic understanding.”

The support extended to his entire team, said Saldana.

“My branch has the most friendly, knowledgeable and professional individuals I have ever had the pleasure to work for,” said Saldana. “They have a strict sense of responsibility and take a lot of pride in their jobs.”

The Wounded Warrior Internship Program matches candidates with assignments according to their interests and skills. It is designed to create productive assignments that are beneficial to the warrior and employer.

Saldana’s combat experience helped inform ways to better support customers in the field and at home, said Orndoff.

Along with new job responsibilities, wounded warrior interns must contend with ongoing medical issues. But NGA made sure his medical care was his top priority, said Saldana.

“NGA was very flexible and encouraged me to take care of my medical issues,” said Saldana.

Saldana also draws strength from his family, he said. His wife and kids have motivated and supported him through every step of the process.

“My family (and) my fallen and wounded brothers are my inspiration and my desire to live,” he said.

Saldana’s service and strength also inspired those around him, said Orndoff.

“Working here at NGA with Rafael, and his fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines has revitalized that long-ago feeling of accomplishment and anticipation of going to work,” said Orndoff. “Rafael is an outstanding role model for all future wounded warriors seeking a new career at NGA. He (believes) that NGA provided him the opportunity and privilege to continue to

serve his fellow service members, the United States Marine Corps, and his country. I am humbled by his sacrifice, sincere desire to help others and duty to country.”

Since the program started in 2009, more than a dozen wounded warriors have been assigned to the Analysis directorate. The directorate continues to work with Human Development to find opportunities to help others, said Laura Jones, deputy chief of staff for Analysis.

Saldana encourages other wounded warriors going through similar transitions to never give up, he said.

“I think it’s hard because you see yourself as not being the same person,” said Saldana. “But you must remind yourself that greatness is nothing but the ability to overcome adversity. It is nothing but an opportunity to become greater.”

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Saldana completed his internship in January and is now looking ahead to what’s next in his journey, he said.

“When I joined the military, I went in knowing what the possibilities could be,” said Saldana. “What I wasn’t expecting was all the generosity and support I received. I was proud to be an American before, but after my injuries and all the support I’ve received, I’m even prouder.”✱