

When Lt. John Alvarez thought he would never fly again, Lt. Col. Thomas Hull (far left), 20th SOS commander, stepped up and promised him he would return to the cockpit. Almost one year later, Alvarez was back at the controls of an Air Force MH-53J Pave Low.

A Leg To Stand On

Horrified, Navy Lt. Juan Alvarez stared at his mangled legs flopping in the strong river current. Writhing pain shot through his body like a malicious lightning bolt. Then suddenly, coldly, it dawned on him.

“I’m going to die here.” But Alvarez didn’t die. He survived a helicopter crash deep in a remote Ecuadorian jungle, minus his lower left leg, which had to be amputated. Miraculously though, the then-interservice exchange pilot and mission planner for the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., overcame his disability to become the first military helicopter pilot to return to active-duty flying status after having a leg amputated.

An MH-53J Pave Low pilot, Alvarez’s remarkable comeback wouldn’t have been possible without the help of Air Force doctors.



He was injured while flying as an observer on a Gazelle gunship helicopter in Coca, Ecuador, Sept. 19, 1996. Flying with a Navy SEAL, Petty Officer 2nd Class Matthew Moore, and an Ecuadorian pilot, the trio crashed into a remote jungle river. During the crash, Alvarez was thrown through the windshield, and Moore managed to swim free of the underwater wreckage. The Ecuadorian pilot did not survive.

Because shock delayed the coming pain, at first Alvarez was unaware of his extensive injuries: an open fracture and complete dislocation of his right knee, a badly damaged left leg, two broken ribs and a severe groin injury. He saw his battered legs before the agony arrived with the fury of a wounded grizzly.

Two Ecuadorian natives in a wooden canoe rescued Alvarez and Moore.

When the survivors arrived at home base 20 minutes later, Capt. (Dr.) Joe Basinger, a Special Ops flight surgeon, and two Navy SEAL corpsmen started immediate emergency care in the canoe. An hour later, an MC-130P Combat Shadow from the 9th SOS at Eglin AFB, Fla., medevaced Alvarez to a civilian hospital in Quito, Ecuador, to save precious time as Basinger fought to keep Alvarez alive.

Unfortunately, Alvarez's left leg still had to be amputated below the knee.

After having his right leg reset and receiving a blood transfusion, Alvarez headed to the United States where he was admitted to Wilford Hall Medical Center for surgery and therapy.

Alvarez set his goal to return to flying status. He went on an aggressive therapy program that allowed him to start walking less than two months after his accident. Equipped with a high-tech prosthetic leg, Alvarez completed his comeback. He was so thankful to the Air Force that recently he transferred services, trading in his sailor's uniforms to become a major wearing Air Force blue.

*— Story contributed by
Master Sgt. Tim Barela (USAFR) and
Tech. Sgt. Pat McKenna of Airman;
Dewey Mitchell, Wilford Hall Public Affairs;
Staff Sgt. Cheryl Toner, Air Force Print News; and
Airman 1st Class Gregory Davenport, Hurlburt Field, Fla.*