FINDING THE STRENGTH TO FIGHT

AIR FORCE BOXER FACES FORMIDABLE OPPONENTS ON CHAMPIONSHIP JOURNEY

STORY BY STAFF SGT. J. PAUL CROXON

Show of strength: Staff Sgt. James Beck's tracheotomy scar and tattoo are physical signs of the opposition he has recently faced and the faith that motivated him to overcome it. The sergeant was photographed by Steve White at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska.

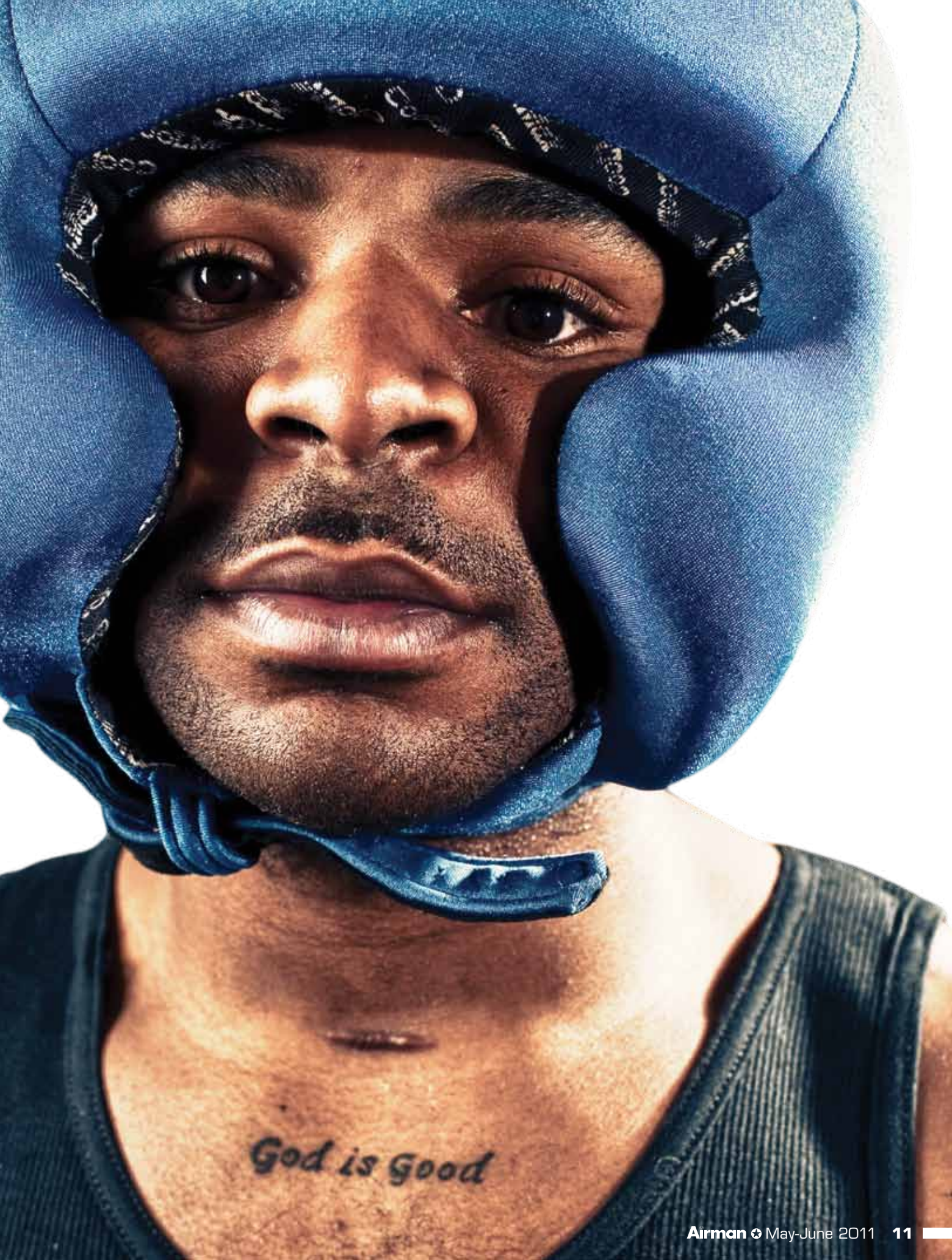

God is Good

photo by Staff Sgt. Vernon Young Jr.

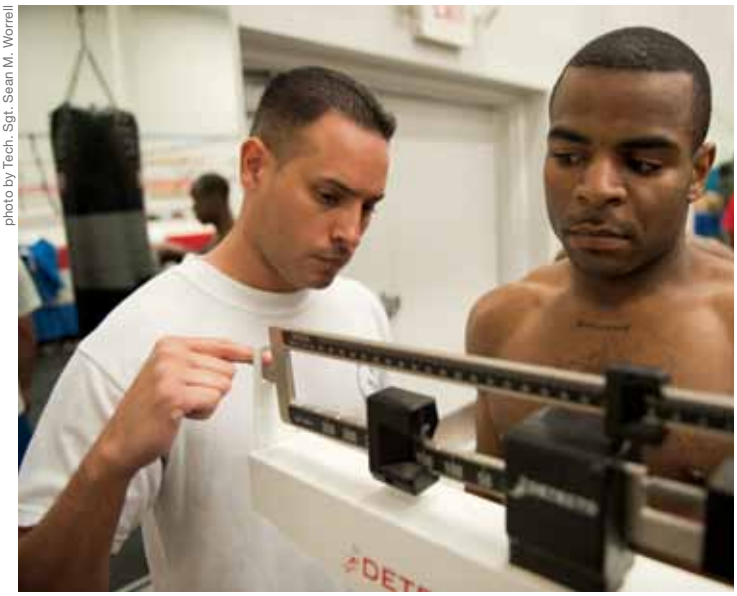
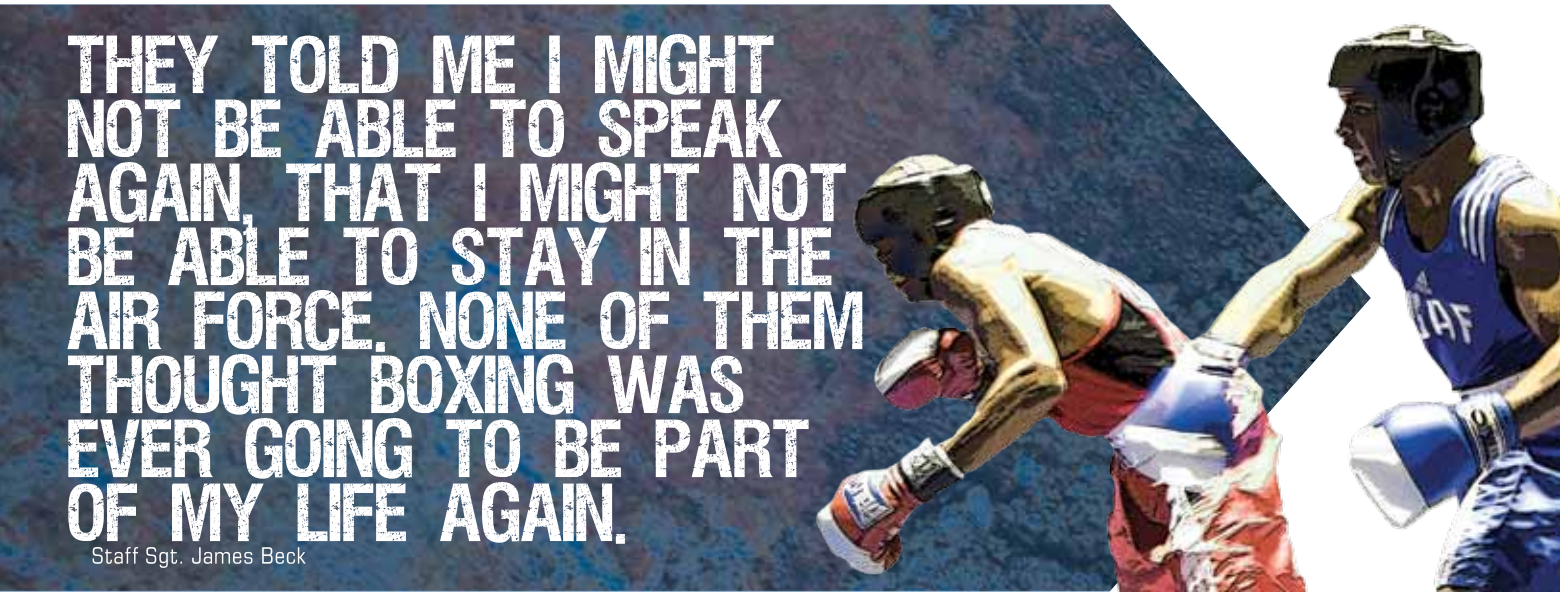


photo by Tech. Sgt. Sean M. Worrell



(above, left) Sergeant Beck walks to the dining facility before a fight at the Armed Forces Boxing Championship at Lackland, Air Force Base, Texas. "I'll only eat a few things the day of [a] fight," he said.

(above, right) Tech. Sgt. Steven Franco checks Sergeant Beck's weight during a training session at the Armed Forces Boxing Championship. The boxers competed for selection to fight at the World Games in Rio de Janeiro.

A pair of marks on Staff Sgt. James Beck's neck tells the interwoven stories of his biggest challenge and greatest strength. One, a two-inch tracheotomy scar, is a permanent reminder of the tumor that almost cost him his career and the sport he loves. The other, a tattoo of the words, "God is Good," indicates the foundation of his recovery and determination to realize his dreams.

Sergeant Beck's two passions, the Air Force and boxing, are as entwined as the marks on his neck. His commitment to each journey gave him the resolve to battle a tumor and self doubt and come back more dangerous in the ring.

FROM HIGH TO LOW

Shortly after enlisting in the Air Force as an aviation resource manager, Sergeant Beck began boxing at a gym near Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va. He progressed quickly and after a few amateur bouts in the 178-pound weight class, he began shedding weight and dropping weight classes as his strength and agility increased.

"At 178 pounds I was usually fighting against tall guys," he said. "Even though they had the height advantage, I was blessed with long arms and speed and I was able to hold my own. Boxing was something I loved and wanted to stick with."

For Sergeant Beck, boxing became like a second full-time job. After finishing his Air Force duties for the day, he would go to the gym and train for hours every night, becoming faster, more focused.

"I knew from the beginning that I wanted to make it to the Air Force boxing training camp and then the Armed Forces Boxing Championship," he said. "The chance to represent the Air Force and fight against the best boxers from the other services was my number one goal."

In early 2010, he was selected to go to the training camp and compete for the Air Force slot in his weight class. Before the time came to step into the ring and sweat with his teammates, however, a phone call turned his world on end.

Sergeant Beck gets prepped before a fight at the Armed Forces Boxing Championship.

Sergeant Beck stands with his Air Force teammates at the Armed Forces Boxing Championship opening ceremonies.

photo by Staff Sgt. Vernon Young Jr.

"I got my [training camp] selection letter on Friday," Sergeant Beck said. "On Monday, I went into the dentist and he told me, 'You have a tumor and we're going to have to cut a piece of your jaw out. You're probably not going to be able to fight anymore.' That crushed me, it just crushed me."

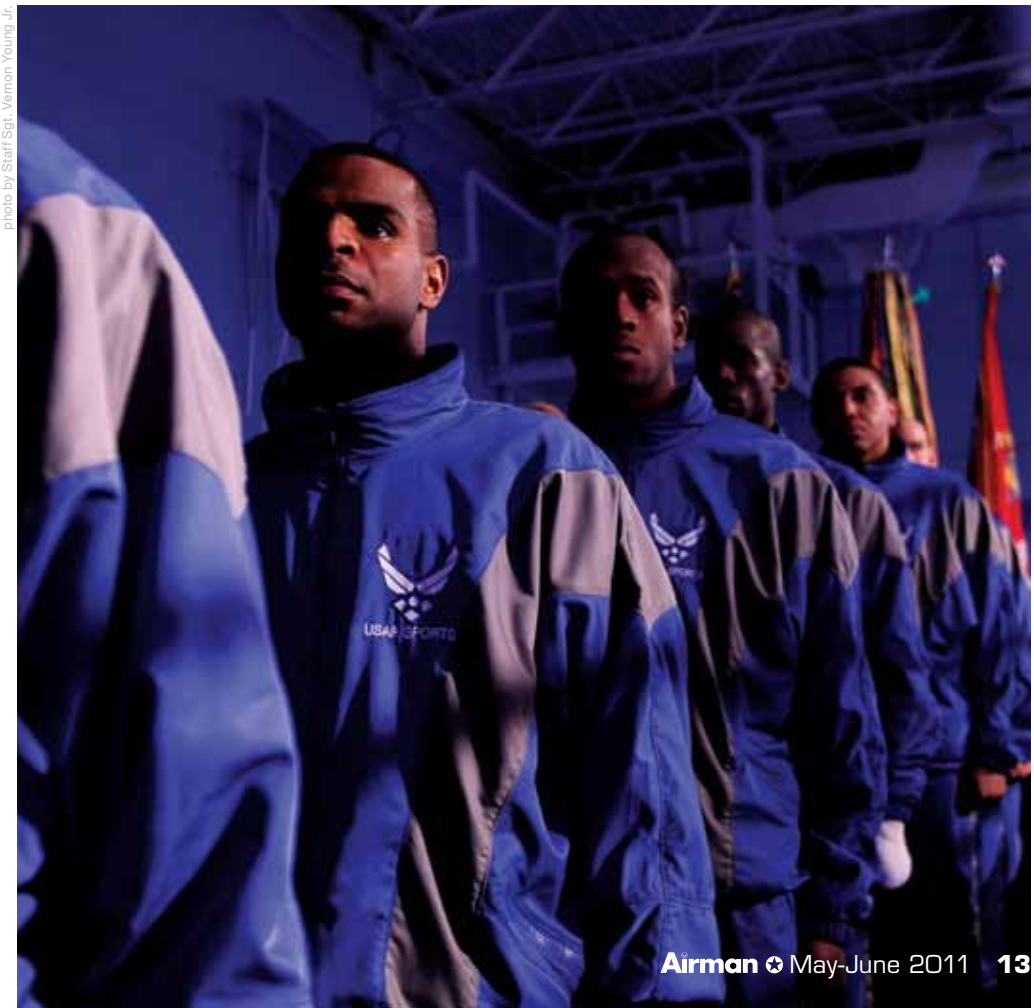
A benign tumor, misdiagnosed by dentists for years as a harmless cyst, had been growing on his jaw. By the time the correct diagnosis was made, the tumor had eaten away most of the bone in the sergeant's hard palate. He was sent immediately to the hospital to seek treatment.

In April 2010, doctors took bone from the fibula in Sergeant Beck's left leg and shaped it to replace the missing section of his jaw. Muscle and veins also were grafted from the leg to create new arteries to feed the transplanted tissue. Doctors formed a flap of tissue to cover the repair in the roof of the sergeant's mouth and inserted a feeding tube into his nose to sustain him as he healed. Finally, a tracheotomy was performed and breathing tube inserted into his throat.

After his surgery, Sergeant Beck spent a week in the hospital. He went home 30 pounds lighter and remained on the feeding tube for an additional two weeks before beginning physical therapy.

"I remember telling my doctors and coaches that I would box again, that I'd be at the 2011 Air Force boxing training camp," he said. "They told me I might not be able to speak again, that I might not be able to stay in the Air Force. None of them thought boxing was ever going to be part of my life again."

photo by Staff Sgt. Vernon Young Jr.



FINDING THE STRENGTH TO FIGHT AGAIN

During the nearly three months Sergeant Beck spent in recovery, an in-home nurse, physical therapist and speech therapist worked with him daily. Unable to train or even hold conversations, he listened to music and recordings of his pastor's sermons. The sermons rekindled his faith and positive outlook.

"When I was stuck at home, I started reading about the Old Testament heroes and all the trials and difficulties that they went through," Sergeant Beck said. "I realized that God wouldn't bring me this far to not let me push further. That was my biggest motivation. I couldn't believe God would let me get this close just to take it away."

In addition to his faith, boxing also prepared the sergeant to overcome his lowest moment. While boxing taught him to keep a positive outlook and keep moving forward, it also taught him what it felt like to give up.

"A few years ago I was fighting in the Golden Gloves when I took a shot that shook me," the sergeant said. "It took all the fight from me. Even though I was winning up until that point, I spent the rest of the fight running from him. The only reason I lost that fight was because I was afraid to keep coming forward. I went home and I had to look at myself in the mirror and had to say to myself that the reason I didn't win the Golden Gloves was because I was scared.

"That was the hardest thing I've ever had to live with, harder even than the surgery. Knowing that I lost, not because the guy was better than me, but because I broke, was something I knew I never wanted to feel again."

By summer, Sergeant Beck was eating solid food again. He had progressed from walking on crutches, taking small steps and walking slowly to power walking. He shocked his doctors with his fast recovery and appeared to be preparing to box again, possibly even to begin getting back in shape for the 2011 Air Force boxing camp.

Just as he was ready to resume training, the sergeant's plans were abruptly put on hold again in July when he was assigned a two-month deployment to Guam. By the time he returned, Sergeant Beck was 195 pounds and out of shape with only four months to get back to his fighting weight. With a newly revived faith and the knowledge of what giving up felt like, he was determined to keep fighting.

ROAD TO THE ARMED FORCES CHAMPIONSHIP

Over the next four months, Sergeant Beck lost nearly five pounds each week, while adding muscle to his frame. In January, he left for the Air Force training camp just a little heavier than his 152-pound fighting weight. While he

Sergeant Beck (in red) and U.S. Marine Corporal Joel Bolden go toe-to-toe during a semi-final bout during the 2011 Armed Forces Boxing Championship.

was not quite back to his 2010 condition, he went into the camp feeling like he had already won. Whether sparring in the ring or collapsing from exhaustion, he continued to smile.

After two weeks of intense training, he fought fellow teammate, 152-pound Daniel Logan. Sergeant Beck's performance impressed the coaches enough to keep him on the team. He represented the Air Force in the welterweight class three weeks later at the Armed Forces Boxing Championship, held at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. He lost to his opponent by a single point but wasn't discouraged, having come so far.

MOTIVATION

Before a fight and during training, Sergeant Beck listens to a particular sermon by his pastor, about the Old Testament story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

"My pastor talks about so hating what's behind you that you keep fighting forward," the sergeant said. "The Israelites had Pharaoh's army behind them and the only way forward was through faith. That's where I am. I am going to fight so hard that I'll impose my will on my opponent. I've come so far that I know I'll come back next year stronger and hungrier."

Sergeant Beck's experiences, especially his recovery from surgery, are more than mere coincidences. They have cemented his faith and provide the means to keep fighting forward.

"I needed a doctor who could perform the bone transplant and the best doctor in the area was on my medical team," he said. "I needed a flap made in my mouth and the best guy was supposed to deploy. His trip was postponed for a week and he was there to perform the surgery on me. I found out that my bone structure was much denser than normal from years of sports and because of that, the bone graft took better. It was like everything prepared me for that one moment."

In one year, James Beck went from 172-pound boxing star, to 143-pound patient, to 195 pounds and out of shape, and finally, back to a 152-pound boxer holding his own against the best in the Department of Defense. While he may have been bested in the ring this year, he's proven that he won't back down from any fight and will always move forward.

photo by Tech. Sgt. Sean M. Worrell

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