

Wounded warrior honored at Washington event

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Wounded warrior Col. Lanier Ward honored at Washington event

Col. Lanier Ward, and the mother of the Soldier killed in the attack that seriously wounded Ward, present a \$3,000 scholarship to Caitlyn Mitts, in honor of the fallen Soldier, Cpl. Tomas Sotelo.



WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Sept. 26, 2013) -- Col. Lanier Ward, commander of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, was honored for his military service, Sept. 25, during an event hosted by the foundation he inspired two young girls to create.

In 2003, Ward was seriously injured by an improvised explosive device, or IED, blast in Iraq. After returning to the United States, his service inspired two neighborhood girls to create the

ThanksUSA organization. The organization provides educational scholarships to the families of military service members.

Ward and his family traveled from Fort Irwin, Calif., to attend the Sept. 25 ThanksUSA 2013 Treasure our Troops Gala in Washington, D.C. He was an honoree at the event. More than 250 people attended, including Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. John F. Campbell and several members of Congress.

Speaking at the event, Ward discussed a young Soldier, Cpl. Tomas Sotelo Jr., who had been killed in the same 2003 IED blast that had injured him.

Ward said the gunner and his crew were "guardian angels," who always followed in the vehicle behind his while he was in Iraq.

He said that on the night of June 27, 2003, a blast shattered the stillness and he lost an "angel," the nation lost a great Soldier, and Sotelo's family suffered an unimaginable loss.

Lt. Gen. Raymond Mason, deputy chief of staff, Army G-4, said that Ward was severely injured in the IED explosion. His right arm was mangled, his elbow gone, and his left foot received sizable pieces of shrapnel.

"This courageous Soldier had a total of 22 surgeries in a two-year period," said Mason, adding that "incredibly" Ward deployed again to Iraq, in 2010.

Mason said that for the past decade, Ward has been part of a generation that, knowing the nation was engaged in two wars, "still kept volunteering to wear the uniform, to go into harm's way."

Ward continues to serve something greater than himself, Mason said, in "defense of this great nation, the defense of freedom."

Ward said he had told doctors he only wished to be able to hold his "beautiful daughter Allie" again.

"I've been blessed far beyond that simple request ever since," he said. "I've been able to stand again in the ranks of my fellow Soldiers in the best Army the world has ever seen."

As Ward recovered, two young neighbors, Rachel and Kelsi Okun, then ages 10 and 8, found inspiration in him and created the ThanksUSA non-profit foundation to mobilize Americans and support the troops and their families.

The group, since its inception in 2006, has awarded more than 2,800 scholarships for a total

value of nearly \$8.5 million.

One such scholarship, in honor of Sotelo, was announced by Ward that evening. The scholarship recipient was Caitlyn Mitts, whose father, Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Charles Mitts, was killed in a training accident in 2009 at Texas A&M University. She is currently a junior at the same school.

Mitts, who said being on campus is a constant remind of her father's passing, said she hopes to work for the FBI, as her father had. She said the night was emotional, but that the scholarship is a great way to honor both Sotelo and her father.

"I feel very thankful and blessed because without this I wouldn't be able to go further into my college career and everything that I want to do," said Mitts, whose scholarship is for \$3,000.