

# Captain Ivan Castro

By: Tony (The Marine) Santiago

**Captain Ivan Castro** (born in 1968) is the only blind officer serving in the United States Army Special Forces. Castro (then a First Lieutenant) was providing support by fire during a battle with insurgents in Iraq when a mortar round exploded close to him leaving him totally blind.

Castro recovered despite the fact that his doctors believed that he would die as a result of his wounds. He continued in the military and is the only blind officer serving in the Special Forces and one of three blind officers who serve in the active-duty Army. Castro, who is an advocate of rehabilitation funding for the blind, is also a marathon runner.



**Captain Ivan Castro**

## Early years

Castro was born in the town of Trujillo Alto, Puerto Rico. His family moved to Hoboken, New Jersey when he was a child and there he received his primary education. In 1980, when he was 12 years old, he moved back to Puerto Rico with his mother after she was divorced.

After Castro graduated from high school he was accepted by the University of Puerto Rico on an athletic scholarship. During his student years he represented his alma mater in Track and Field competitions. In 1990, Castro had lost interest in college in his senior year and enlisted in the United States Army.

He married in 1990, he and his wife had one child, Ivan Eduardo, in 1993, before they divorced in 1997. In 1999, Castro's mother died and after her funeral, he went to the Dominican Republic to regroup his thoughts. During his visit there Castro met Evelyn Galvis. Galvis was raised in Queens, New York City and happened to be on vacation. They were married in 2001, 18 months after they met.

## Military career

Castro went to Ranger school after he completed his basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. Later he completed a grueling year long course of Special Forces training and earned his "Green Beret". Castro's "MOS" was Special Forces weapons specialist sergeant. Castro went to night school to finish his B.A and before attending the Army's Officers Candidate School. He earned an officer's commission of First Lieutenant and joined the 82nd Airborne Division.

## Deployment to Iraq

Before being sent to Iraq, Castro was already an experienced combat veteran. He was deployed almost immediately as an infantryman in the Gulf War during Operation Desert Storm and later served in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. He also participated in Operation Desert Shield and in missions in South America,

In 2006, Castro was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, which is one of the United States military units in Iraq.

In September 2006, after a night of fighting Castro and his men had relieved other paratroopers atop a house in Yusifiyah, Iraq, some 20 miles southwest of Baghdad. As an officer Castro did not have to be up there providing fire support to fellow soldiers. However, he volunteered for the mission and was accompanied by Sergeant Ralph Porras and Private First Class Justin Dreese.



**1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Ivan Castro**

A mortar round landed a few feet away from him killing Sergeant Porras and PFC. Dreese and severely wounding Castro. Shrapnel tore through his body damaging a shoulder, braking an arm, fracturing facial bones and collapsing his lungs. The blast also drove the frame of his protective eyewear into his face.

Castro was sent to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. The top half of his right index finger was ripped off and the doctors had to amputate the remaining part of the finger. His right eye was blown out and he had a metal fragment in his left eye. Doctors questioned whether Castro would make it through another week.

When Castro regained consciousness days later, his wife, Evelyn, was at his bedside. She told him his right eye was gone, but doctors hoped to salvage the vision in his left. The surgeons later removed one last piece of shrapnel from that eye. When they took off his bandages they flashed a light for Castro to see, however when Castro did not respond to the light he was told that he would never see again.

Castro was lying in a hospital bed for two months after he was injured, with no idea of what he was going to do. He then overheard a doctor and a nurse discussing the next Army Ten-Miler and the Marine Corps Marathon]. He asked his doctor if the course was flat or hilly. He then made the running of both marathons his goal.

His wife, Evelyn, gave up her career as a bilingual speech pathologist in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to help her husband. She supervises his medical care and drives him around.

### **Recovery**

Castro, who has a prosthetic right eye, spent 17 months in recovery before seeking a permanent assignment in the service's Special Operations Command. Before he was appointed executive officer of the 7th Special Forces Group's headquarters company in Fort Bragg, he spent a weekend walking around the Group area to know just where he was going. He carefully measured the steps from car to office.

Upon Castro's appointment he became the only blind officer serving in the Special Forces and one of three blind officers who serve in the active-duty Army. His managerial tasks are not directly involved with combat. He has taken upon himself the task of honing the group's Spanish training, a useful language for a unit that deploys regularly to train South American troops. He is quoted as saying:

"I am going to push the limits," "I don't want to go to Fort Bragg and show up and sit in an office. I want to work every day and have a mission." "I want to be treated the same way as other officers," Castro said. "I don't want them to take pity over me or give me something I've not earned."

Through convalescence and rehabilitation, Castro struggled to regain a measure of independence and regularly runs and works at the gym..

### **The Marathons**

At Bragg, Castro trained for the Army Ten-Miler and the Marine Corps Marathon races with Maj. Phil Young, who was Castro's team leader in the Special Forces.

In October 2007, Castro traveled to the Washington, D.C. to run the Army Ten-Miler as a member of the "Missing Parts In Action" team. The team is composed of military amputees and their physical therapists. They began competing in the Army 10-Miler as the brainchild of the team captain, US Army Major David Rozelle.

Castro ran alongside Young connected by two white shoelaces tied together. Most of the guiding was done with the string while Young warned Castro of possible hazards. Castro ran the marathon in 1 hour, 25 minutes.



**Capt. Ivan Castro (#41) and Maj. Phil Young (#70321) run the Army Ten-Miler**

Castro then focused on the Marine Corps Marathon which he ran on October 29th, 2007, exhausting two running companions before latching onto a third, to finish in 4 hours, 14 minutes.

In 2008, he ran in both the Bataan Memorial Death March Marathon in New Mexico and the Boston Marathon. He ran the Boston Marathon with Admiral Eric T. Olson, commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command. On April 10, 2007, Castro was promoted to the rank of Captain by Adm. Olson at Fort Bragg.

On September 20, 2008, Castro participated in the 12th annual United States Air Force Marathon at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, a 26.6 mile run. Castro and his wife, Evelyn both wore identical T-shirts which sported a logo for the 7th Special Forces and the words "Castro — Blind Runner." Lieutenant Colonel Fred Dummer was his running guide and was connected to him by a white shoestring which each man held. During the marathon Castro suffered a mishap when he crashed into a wall. He continued to run and as the crowd's cheered, crossed the finish line to the in 4 hours, 16 minutes. Before Castro departed for Fort Bragg on September 21, 2008, he was given a hero's good-bye by the people of Dayton, Ohio at the Dayton Airport Hotel Parking Lot.

### **Currently**

Castro continues in his position as the executive officer of the 7th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg and hopes to stay in the military. He is looking forward to taking and graduating from the Army's officer advanced course, which teaches captains how to lead troops and plan operations.

Next year he plans on competing in the Ironman triathlon in Hawaii and running in The New York City Marathon. Castro's sports activities are not limited to running marathons. He has also participated in bicycling competitions. In 2008, Castro and his wife Evelyn, as members and participants of Operation Peer Support, participated in the BVA (Blinded Veterans Association) 62nd National Convention whose activities included skiing, ice skating, snowboarding, and snowshoeing.

Castro is an advocate of rehabilitation funding for the blind, visiting members of Congress in his quest. He was honored during a visit to the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia with a plaque engraved in Braille, which thanked him for his continued service.

### **Awards and decorations**

Among Capt. Ivan Castro's military decorations are the following . . .

- \*Purple Heart Medal
- \*Army Commendation Medal
- \*Meritorious Service Medal
- \*Air Medal
- \*Joint Services Commendation Medal
- \*Army Commendation Medal
- \*National Defense Service Medal
- \*Army Service Ribbon
- \*Army Overseas Service Ribbon
- \*Afghanistan Campaign Medal
- \*Iraq Campaign Medal
- \*Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal
- \*Global War on Terrorism Service Medal
- \*Presidential Unit Citation
- \*Meritorious Unit Commendation

#### **Badges:**

- \*Combat Infantryman Badge
- \*Parachutist badge

#### **Tabs:**

- \*Special Forces Tab
- \*Ranger Tab