



Above: Matt Hughes visits wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Hospital.

## A LUNCH EVERY AMERICAN SHOULD HAVE

Matt Hughes Meets Some of America's True Heroes

BY KELLY CRIGGER

**“Y**ou should have killed me when you had the chance,” Matt Hughes mutters as he holds up a gunmetal gray shirt and reads it to himself. On the shirt is a soldier with a prosthetic leg and the phrase that is apropos for the situation. Flanked by his friend and coach Marc Fiore and Army MMA champion Tim Kennedy, Hughes is surrounded by wounded warriors at Walter Reed Army Hospital, where only the most seriously injured are assigned for long-term care.

The luncheon is run by Soldier's Angels, a non-profit organization that cares for the troops when their families can't. “They live here for up to eighteen months so they can't always have family around because it's just too expensive for them,” says Soldier's Angels co-ordinator Monica Dillon. “We try to be that link to the outside world so they don't feel alone while they're here.”

Hughes socializes with anyone and everyone like a guy trying to get caught up with a bunch of old buddies at a reunion. Unlike other celebrities who feel uncomfortable around guys with traumatic injuries, he has no problem jumping into a conversation with a wheelchair-bound soldier. He refuses to hide behind a table and sign the shirts provided by Ranger Up, choosing instead to stand out front, mingling, eating, and being a regular guy. At least as regular as a nine-time UFC champion can be. Even after his long line of admirers has been exhausted and all the free shirts are gone, he circumnavigates the room to make sure everyone who wanted a picture got one. Between him and Kennedy, everyone gets time with an MMA fighter.

The humility of these celebrities does not go unnoticed. “We really appreciate the support, the enthusiasm, the compassion,” says Army Specialist Johnnie G. “We appreciate them taking the time out.

It means a lot to us.” That accolade is more than just a superficial thanks. Soldiers are used to celebrities and athletes stopping by for visits, and they happen do frequently these days that they've learned to discern a self-serving phony who want a quick photo op from the ones who genuinely care. Gary Sinise and Toby Keith are two legends among the military because of their repeated trips overseas to entertain the troops in the most dangerous of combat zones. Hughes has done his share of troop visits and Kennedy is a combat vet, so their respect is genuine and the feeling is mutual.

“What surprised me is how upbeat everyone is,” Hughes says after the lunch ends. “It's really uplifting and fulfilling to see all these guys with these life-altering wounds and hear how positive they are about it. I mean if you took away one of my legs I'd be a bitter guy, but these guys take it in stride and keep moving.”

“There's no other choice,” Dillon counters. “Many of them go through that phase of sitting in their room being depressed, but they all get over it and get going again...eventually.”

The MMA contingent was courtesy of the Ultimate Warrior Challenge that held its fifth show in Fairfax, Virginia later that night. Hughes cornered two fighters from his HIT Squad, but didn't have as much success in the cage as he had at the hospital. Both lost, which is a bitter pill for an alpha male like him to swallow. but when asked about his visit earlier in the day, he was all smiles.

“I loved it,” Hughes says. “Everyone should do that. Every American should have the opportunity to have lunch with those guys.”

**For more information about Soldiers Angels please visit their website at <http://www.soldiersangels.org/>**