Muammar Al-Hiyali recounts a painful incident from eight years ago when an explosion near a crowded restaurant took dozens of lives and injured many more. His brother-in-law was one of the wounded. He was left heavily bleeding with shrapnel in his abdomen. Fortunately, he was rushed to hospital before it was too late. Having almost lost someone dear to him in the blink of an eye, Muammar decided to find a job helping others, in the hope that their loved ones would not lose them either.

When he was younger, Muammar hoped to go to medical school, but his need to earn a living made this impossible. “I’ve had to support myself since I was a teenager,” says 45-year-old Muammar. “I was working and studying at the same time, so I couldn’t become a doctor. Life doesn’t always give us the chance to do what we want.”

When the Islamic State group took control of Mosul, Muammar left the city with his wife and four children. Life outside Mosul was not easy; he had to start again from scratch, while constantly worrying about his relatives back in the city. In 2015, he started work as a logistician for a medical organisation in Sulaymaniyah, but his love for Mosul never waned. “In one of the markets I used to go to, there was a piece of graffiti of migrating birds with the words ‘We will return one day’,” he says. “Every time I looked at it, I missed Mosul even more. After the battle to retake the city, I decided to go back home to help my city in any way I could.”

Muammar now works as head of drivers in MSF’s post-operative care hospital in East Mosul. He manages a team of 15 drivers and coordinates the movements of all MSF’s vehicles. The members of his team feel more like friends or brothers to him; they spend every morning together before going about their daily tasks.

Muammar believes his job contributes to the patients’ recovery, so he executes his tasks with dedication. He often tells people about MSF’s services to help the information reach whoever needs it. One of his friends was in a serious car accident and was told his leg might have to be amputated, but at Muammar’s suggestion he came to MSF’s hospital, where the surgical team was able to save his leg.

“What motivates me and makes me love my job is a patient’s joy when they’re recovering,” he says. “As staff members, we follow them on their journey of healing. We forget the strain of work when we see them able to walk again.”

Muammar owns a small farm, which he inherited from his grandfather. He visits it daily to take care of the trees and plants, but wishes he had more time to devote to it. “My dream is to expand my grandfather’s farm: to plant fruits and vegetables and to keep some cows or sheep,” he says. “I’d like it to become a place for family gatherings, where my children, my nieces and my nephews can play together. I hope that one day my dream will come true.”