

22A | www.star-telegram.com

Star-Telegram | Sunday, January 18, 2004

Alan's Angels

By CHRIS VAUGHN
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

Alan Babin, the kid who could never stop talking, the kid who traded a job at Hooters for an Airborne beret after 9/11, left for war on his mother's birthday.

He called his family during a brief stop in Germany, and they talked for a few minutes. After that, they didn't hear from him for almost a month.

War preparations were a full-time job, and downtime was as rare as the sight of a phone.

Alan practiced urban combat with the 82nd Airborne Division on an island off Kuwait and polished his skills as a medic. He worked at sick call at his base camp, treating soldiers for stomach bugs and giving smallpox vaccinations to the latecomers.

On March 13, he called Round Rock in the middle of the night. It was an unburied conversation that lasted a good 20 minutes with his parents, Alan and Rosie, and his sister, Christy. When they were finished, they patched together a three-way call and got Alan's girlfriend on the line for an additional 15 minutes.

They remember that it cost \$95.

Alan asked about Christy's softball season and about friends back in Round Rock. He betrayed no second thoughts, no reservations, no hesitation about what his country was about to undertake in Iraq. He sounded confident and sure.

"He said, 'Mom, I'm OK. We're ready. We know what our mission is,'" Rosie remembers.

Before they finished, Rosie told her son one last thing. "As a mother, I wasn't worried that he would get injured or killed. I couldn't imagine that that would even happen. That happened to other people's kids," she remembers.

"But I was worried about what he would be exposed to in war. I told him, 'Alan, guard your heart. Remember how you were raised. Look to God.'" Everyone said, "I love you."

That was the last time she heard his voice.

Sunday, April 15, 2003, 9:42 p.m.

Dear Alan's Angels:
We actually received 2 telephone calls today from the ship. While Alan was taking a call from Dr. O'Neil at home, I received a call on work from a nurse that I sent and holding up pictures that I sent and sitting and holding his hand. He still has a tube in so he is unable to communicate... She said he squeezes hard when she reads our letters...

—Hugs, Rosie

Alan Babin, a 23-year-old fourth-generation military man, has known only hospitals since a bullet tore through his belly as he ran to treat a soldier wounded in a fierce firefight March 31.

He has endured more than 70 surgeries, countless infections, including bacterial meningitis and a stroke.

Bedridden for nine months, still fed by a tube running directly into his intestines, he can't speak. He communicates only with hand gestures and blinks. He is in a rehabilitation hospital in Austin, relearning how to sit up, stand and, hopefully, walk.

It is sometimes tough for people who remember the Alan who competed in kickboxing tournaments and played right field in the Round Rock baseball league. He was a ceaselessly talkative young man with an infectious personality, who as a young child would walk up to strangers, stick out his hand, introduce himself and say, "Now we're not strangers anymore."

Slowly, painfully and quite ingloriously, Alan is clawing his way back, beginning to show signs of that personality again.

"Watching him and Christy the other day, you could see him," said Rosie, a child of Mexican immigrants and, like



Rosie Babin, right, encourages Alan during a physical therapy session conducted by Christienne Parten, left, and Joy Furman at Texas NeuroRehab Center in Austin. Alan attends therapy twice a day, and his mother is always by his side.



The arduous therapy sessions include mental and physical activities that Rosie Babin says are helping her son. "I can't help but think he's gaining weight because he's sleeping better," she said.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON T. ENNIS
STAR-TELEGRAM

her husband, a U.S. Army veteran. "You could see my kid. He continues to make an impression on strangers, too."

About 25 people received Rosie Babin's first e-mail. But as her e-mails to "Alan's Angels" grew in number, the list of recipients grew, too, until she eventually had more than 500 names in the address book on her laptop.

Those 500 forwarded the messages to their family and friends, and it soon became clear that thousands of people had taken an interest in Alan's will to live.

So many e-mails originated from Rosie's computer each day that servers began to block them because they thought they were spam. Now, Rosie updates Alan's followers on a Web site.

"It was such a source of comfort and support to us, especially because we couldn't use our phones" while Alan was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Rosie said. "It was so great at the end of the day to check our e-mails and to have all these love letters from people we know and people we didn't know."

Rosie remembers a doctor telling her in the days after Alan was injured, "If you have faith, you need to be praying."

She sent the e-mails as a way to encourage other people to pray, to will Alan on. After all these months, those e-mails and the inspiration they carry are but a small release for her, a way for her to cope with all a mother and her son have endured.

"Alan is alive. How can I not be positive?" Rosie said. "I get the blessing of walking through this journey with him. Every day is another day Alan goes to be in our lives."

—Friday, April 25, 2003, 1:37 a.m.

—According to Dr. Kirby, Alan's injuries were "devastating" and he is only here because of a miracle. I informed him that we were



Alan spent nine months in hospital beds after he was shot trying to aid a fellow soldier in Iraq. He will spend many more months working to regain use of his muscles.

praying for him as we were people across the country. He said we needed to keep praying hard and repeated several times that it was a miracle he was surviving his wounds and should have been gone by now, but he was amazed at Alan after each surgery. Explained that he has treated many in Alan's situation and just amazed that he is still with us.

—He is just an "awful sick young man." Dr. Kirby kept saying. Said had the people out in the field and then the field hospital not taken the exact steps to save his life, he would not be treating Alan today.

In God's Love, Alan, Rosie and Christy

Alan's parents beamed with pride March 6, 2003, when he

"Jump school was the highlight of Alan's life," Rosie said. "He was on top of the world. We would get a two-hour phone call after one of his jumps. He was high."

It was good to see Alan so excited about something, so committed to pursuing a goal. Just a few years before, he had endlessly frustrated his parents by not doing his homework, and, finally, by dropping out of Round Rock High School his senior year.

His parents sometimes wondered what he was doing with his life, living at home, cooking hot wings at Hooters, working at Blockbuster.

"Without exception, the teachers would say, 'Alan has a great personality, and he is smart enough to do the work. But he doesn't do it,'" said Alan, who was a Huey helicopter crew chief in Germany. "He always has won people over with his smile and personality. School just bored him, I think."

Jump school followed 10 weeks of medic training at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. Alan could go home on weekends, eat home cooking and soak up his parents' attention.

He told them he thought that he would use his training to get into nursing or perhaps physical therapy. But right then, he just wanted to jump out of airplanes.

"He was proud of being a soldier," Alan said. "I find peace in that."

—Wednesday, May 7, 2003, 12:22 a.m.

Dearest Angels, We are still in a bit of a state of shock as we were informed after his surgery that the abdomen will remain open for anywhere from 8-12 months. Yeah. That was our reaction, too. Apparently, it is because of the issues with the fissure in his stomach and inability to re-join it to the intestine and the swelling associated with the lack of ability to absorb nutrition for so long.

—I just returned from help-

ing with bathing Alan. He was very alert and a real champ through it all. He has more drains coming out of him than you can ever imagine, plus the trachea (tracheostomy tube), so turning him on his side is quite precarious, but he just winks at us when we get him on his back to let us know he's okay... His entrance/exit wounds are healing quite nicely and, amazingly enough, have become secondary to all the other issues.

Counting you among our blessings, Love and hugs, Alan, Rosie, Alan and Christy



March 31 was the second day of war for the troops in 1st Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment.

The soldiers in 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company were securing an area near Bridge 1, which spanned the Euphrates River in Samawah. Alan was attached to Alpha Company as its medic, but because he was new, not many of the soldiers knew him well. They had taken fire from 3:30 a.m. on, from a combination of paramilitary and uniformed troops.

With sporadic fire erupting around them, they moved through a tree line, systematically securing the areas around the bridge. But in one moment, the battle instantly intensified. The Iraqis opened up on them from the trees with AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades.

"In the middle of that fire-fight, we started taking cross fire from across the road," said Sgt. Steven Dukes, a soldier in Alpha Company who has since returned to Fort Bragg, N.C., home of the 82nd Airborne. "It was pretty intense. RPGs were hitting the trees around us. We were taking it from both sides."

The soldiers were pulling back into the trees to form a better defensive position when a bullet hit a private in the head. Alan saw the private, down perhaps 20 meters away, start running toward him.

"As he turned around and started running toward him, he got shot," Dukes said.

Staff Sgt. Jesse Walker ran to Alan, started an IV, put dressings on his wound and administered drugs to stop the bleeding. Everyone knew that a belly wound was a bleeder.

As soon as the shooting died down, the soldiers moved Alan to a Humvee and took him to a nearby aid station.

"The only time I left hospital was when the aid station started coming under direct fire," Dukes said.

Alan had to wait more than three hours for a helicopter to get him off the battlefield. He lay in great pain, surrounded only by his fellow paratroopers.

"He was pretty calm," Dukes said. "He wasn't giving up. The only thing he wanted was a picture of his girlfriend. We took it out of his Kevlar and gave it to him."

Alpha Company's commander, Capt. Shannon Nielsen, later nominated Alan for a Bronze Star for valor. He received it last summer.

This soldier went above and beyond the call of duty. Nielsen wrote. "He moved to treat another paratrooper while his platoon was taking effective mortar, RPG and small-arms fire. A true inspiration."

Col. Eric W. Nantz, the battalion commander, added his own words: "Tremendous sacrifice by this young hero. Truly deserving of this award."

As Alan's parents pieced together what happened that day, when they read the citation for the Bronze Star, it reminded them of a time

Continued on next page