

[Print This Article](#)  
[E-Mail This Article](#)

## The Wounds of War

Fewer American soldiers are dying by gunfire in Iraq than in previous wars, but more are battling serious injuries after they arrive home. Alan Babin would tell you just how tough it is, if he could

[Find Your Dream Job Now!](#)

*By Monte Reel*  
Sunday, December 19, 2004; Page W06

The officers liked to tell the younger infantrymen that combat boiled down to hours of boredom punctuated by a few seconds of sheer terror, an overworked line that was only partly true. The boredom, the soldiers learned, could also be broken by false alarms -- randomly timed moments of dread that never quite matured into full-scale terror. Like when a rocket-propelled grenade skipped across the ground and thumped one of the infantrymen squarely in the chest; everyone waited for a grisly detonation, but it never came. They watched another grenade lodge in the crown of a nearby palm tree and braced for a hot and splintery wind. The seconds stretched out slowly but ultimately revealed nothing more explosive than the soldiers' own heartbeats. Another dud.

### RSS NEWS FEEDS

[Top News Post](#)

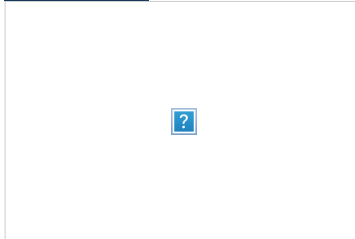
[What is RSS? | All RSS Feeds](#)



Pfc. Alan Babin, like everyone else in his 41-man 82nd Airborne Division platoon, had spent the early morning hours of March 31, 2003, crouching beside an abandoned cement factory in Samawah, Iraq, watching the accruing light of day slowly sketch details of the landscape: shallow drainage ditches flanking a road, a clearing of sparse marsh grass, a bridge spanning the Euphrates River. On the other side of the river, minarets rose above the flat tops of boxy buildings. The soldiers had been forewarned that an Iraqi paramilitary group hiding among those buildings might be ready to fight. Shortly after the call to prayer blared from a mosque's loudspeaker, the tight rattle of AK-47 fire confirmed the prediction.

Alan was the platoon's lone medic, and he stayed near the center of the formation to run to anyone who might need him and his rucksack of medical supplies. Officers shouted into their radios, instructing infantrymen to adjust position in response to the sporadic influx of bullets, grenades and mortars. Pfc. Joe Heit, lying prone in a small clearing of grass, heard someone say that an enemy vehicle was approaching, and he rose to his knees to look.

[enlarge photo](#)



Alan Babin reacts to Al Sr.'s touch as neighbor and friend Andrea Lovelidge looks on. (Andrea Bruce Woodall)

[Photo Gallery](#)  
[The Wounds of War](#)

Another call crackled through radio headsets: "Heit is hit!"

A bullet had shattered Heit's glasses, nicked the soft skin at the corner of his eye socket, punctured the cartilage of his ear and exited the back of his helmet. He was dazed and a little bloodied, but otherwise fine.

Alan had no way of knowing the injury was minor. All he could

have known was that someone was down, and that preparing for this precise circumstance had accounted for much of his recent history. Less than two years before, during those heady weeks after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the 21-year-old told family and friends that he needed to reshape his life and find a clearer sense of purpose, something more fulfilling than working at a deli in his home town of Round Rock, Tex. When he decided that the military might provide it, he made an Army recruiter promise him -- in writing -- that he could train as a medic; he figured that after he was discharged, he might become a sports trainer or a physical therapist. He lifted weights and drank nutritional supplements, confessing once to his mother that he didn't want to risk buckling under the weight of a wounded soldier if he ever had to carry one on his back. By the time he was deployed to Kuwait in February 2003, he had confronted the possibility of a more serious challenge.

"It's funny when I think about it," Alan wrote to his family from Kuwait two weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq began on March 19, 2003. ". . . I never really thought that someone would be shooting at me at the same time!"

Alan ran about 15 feet across the clearing toward Heit before he himself was hit. The bullet cored him, blowing a hole in his gut roughly the size and shape of a football. It grazed his liver, caught the spleen, destroyed 90 percent of his stomach, nipped the pancreas and bored numerous holes in the coils of his small intestine. He spun on his heels and fell onto the seat of his pants, his legs stretched straight out in front of him. His back was propped against his rucksack, and his helmet slipped over his eyes. To some of the other soldiers catching a glimpse of him there, he appeared as a figure in casual repose, a catnapper with a dark stain spreading under his shirt.

Lt. David Powell ran to Alan, whose breaths were quick and shallow. Powell and another soldier pushed Alan's helmet back, and they saw that his eyes were open. They asked him questions as they rummaged in his sack for bandages and ripped off his shirt, but he wasn't speaking.

A helicopter arrived carrying medics who were stationed at an air base a 25-minute flight away. One of them, Henry Barbe, tried to check Alan's vital signs, but the electronic blood-pressure monitor failed to detect a diastolic pulse.

Barbe and another medic tapped Alan's veins and dripped saline solution into them, and eventually his blood pressure rose to detectable levels. But his eyelids were heavy, and he was leaking blood under the clinging bandages. The only painkiller Barbe carried was morphine, and he was afraid the drug might knock Alan out. Barbe rubbed his knuckles hard against Alan's skin and slapped him softly.

"Look at me," Barbe remembers yelling at him.

Barbe figured if Alan fell asleep, he might not wake up again.

The helicopter rose in a dusty cloud and carried Alan toward what would become the reality of his war: A few seconds of terror followed by months and months of agonizing tests of will, the outcomes of which would reshape his life and those of his family in ways they never could have predicted.

He was the first serious casualty from a division that would suffer about 200 more in the next 18 months, 36 of them fatal. Overall, as of press time, 9,552 American service members had been wounded and 1,259 killed in Iraq. Since World War I, the ratio of U.S. troops wounded-to-killed had consistently hovered around 3-to-1 in American-fought wars. The higher ratio in Iraq has been attributed to many things -- from improvements in body armor and triage to the widespread use of improvised explosive devices that maim more often than they kill. Whatever the cause, the result is that Iraq has become a war of the wounded.

When the medevac helicopter approached the hospital near the air base, Barbe watched Alan's eyelids sink lower. He grabbed Alan's thick eyebrows and started ripping, tearing the hairs out with his hands. Alan's eyes opened wider.

THE LEMON-BRIGHT KITCHEN IS THE HEART OF THE BABIN HOUSE IN ROUND ROCK, the hub where hurrying bodies collide on their way to and from school, work, fishing trips and Lions Club meetings. A different colored dry-erase marker represents each of the two children, and the white board near the refrigerator has diagrammed the plots of their lives: the tae kwon do practices, softball schedules, cross-country meets. The kitchen is where neighbors gossip over fajitas and beer, and where Rosie Babin loves to preside over all the action with a personality that is as large as she is small.

She's the essence of Tex-Mex, a first-generation U.S. citizen with a kitchen drawer full of woven tortilla covers and a closet full of cowboy boots. She's addicted to personal organizers. She's a talker, a laugher, a dancer, a joker, a home-team booster, a five-places-at-once firebrand with a self-improvement streak and a trust in gut feelings. The fact that traces of all of those can be detected in both of her children -- Alan and Christy -- is a point of pride. The fact that they are as openly fond of her as she is of them is another.

When her son was deployed to Kuwait, Rosie turned the house into something like a rear-operations command center. Televisions in various rooms were tuned to 24-hour news channels. The laptop computer was running hot, searching the Internet for any mention of the 82nd Airborne Division. On March 29, 2003, while other divisions were on their way to invade Baghdad, Rosie found an article that said the 82nd had moved from Kuwait to south-central Iraq, to engage paramilitary forces that were attacking convoy routes.

Though the invasion seemed to be unfolding as well as could have been hoped, Rosie took note of the scattered reports of casualties from other divisions. She'd try to calm herself with mathematics: There were tens of thousands of soldiers and only a handful of casualties. Personal tragedy, she reasoned, was almost mathematically impossible. Both Rosie and her husband, Al Sr., were veterans themselves, having served in the Army together after high school. They'd loudly applauded their son's decision to follow in their footsteps, but they'd never been in a war, and now their pride was tempered with disquiet. Rosie would hear another casualty report, remind herself of the math and pray. The call came early in the morning on March 31, from Alan's unit commander.

Part of her expected it, part of her was shocked. Rosie grabbed a pen to scribble notes:

*Alan has been wounded . . . received gunshot to abdomen . . . small arms . . . being medevaced to a field hospital and then flown to Germany . . . currently in stable condition . . . will continue to update us as they get more information . . . as soon as he has access to a telephone, they will have him call us personally . . .*

She instructed friends not to call the house, to keep the line free.

Days passed, and the house couldn't get any cleaner. The laundry was all washed, dried, folded and stowed. Several times Rosie called Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, but Alan wasn't listed on the manifest of newly admitted patients. After the Babins' congressman made a few calls on their behalf, they got a call from the Pentagon on April 5 informing them that Alan wasn't in Germany at all -- he was on the USNS Comfort, a medical ship in the Persian Gulf. Rosie scribbled more notes:

*Back in surgery . . . injuries to pancreas, stomach, bowel . . . blood pressure dropped . . . heart rate erratic . . . kidneys not functioning right . . . fighting infection . . . heavily sedated . . .*

And the earlier part about him being in "stable" condition, that should have been "critical."

The next Monday, Rosie drove to the accounting office she managed -- she couldn't even think of calling in sick during the height of tax season. She promised herself that she would keep her emotions in check from 9 to 5, so she cried in the car on the drive to work, and she cried all the way home.

In the house, hours passed wordlessly: Rosie was often downstairs; Al Sr. was outside; younger sister Christy was in her room. At night, Rosie would surrender to insomnia and crawl out of bed at 3:30 a.m. to sneak to the computer downstairs and research the functions of the pancreas, the stomach, the bowels. But she'd freeze in the upstairs hallway, hearing muted sobs from behind the door of Christy's room. Everything Rosie had taken for granted for 25 years, since she married Al Sr. as an 18-year-old and had Alan two years later, was teetering on the edge of something she didn't recognize. The house had become funereal. Rosie hated the pin-drop silence and all of its dark suggestions. Even the strongest families, she suspected, could fall apart.

"I know why this happened to us," she'd say later. "We've had it easy our whole lives. We've never had a crisis before. Never. This is a test."

The following days brought more details, through a series of phone calls from doctors on the ship. As news about Alan shook the neighborhood grapevine, some unexpected fruit fell from it: The next-door neighbor of a friend's son's girlfriend was a nurse stationed on the Comfort. E-mail addresses were exchanged. Within 24 hours, Rosie and Al Sr. were getting stealth reports from the nurse, who would sit by Alan's bed for hours, holding his hand, watching him drift into and out of consciousness, his eyes sometimes scanning the room and his mouth still silent. If the family wanted to write something, she said, she'd love to read the letters to him.

Several days later, on April 15, Rosie stepped into the kitchen to find Christy.

"I need to write something to Alan," Christy told her.

The sight of Christy at the table, typing the e-mail to her brother, consoled Rosie. It wasn't quite the same as walking in to find her two kids joking in the kitchen after school, but given the circumstances, it was close enough.

TRACIE BROWN SAT BY THE EDGE OF ALAN'S BED AND STARTED TO READ THE E-MAIL ALOUD:

"Hey Big Bro! Well, you've pulled off your biggest stunt, and I wasn't there to try it too! Of course, this is a lot bigger than riding our bikes up the slanted tree on Pickwick or putting a battery on our tongue to see who could hold out the longest! Nope, what you've done, what you've been through was much greater than any dare someone could pull out of their imagination, even a triple dog dare. You chose to survive, and I've never been so proud of anybody or any cause as I am now . . . "

Brown had to stop; her voice was cracking. Another nurse, Tara Cozzarelli, took over:

**CONTINUED** [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [Next >](#)

[Print This Article](#)

[E-Mail This Article](#)

© 2004 The Washington Post Company