

TELEGRAPH

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Injured soldier makes trek home to be with unit

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ROCHELLE — Spc. Jason Baldwin couldn't wait to see his buddies again.

"I'm excited, I can't wait to see them," he said Friday afternoon, one day before getting to see the members of his unit again.

Baldwin saw many of them Saturday for the first time since he was injured Aug. 11. Baldwin, now 21, suffered injuries to the right side of his face. The blast from a roadside bomb during a late-night patrol also severed his left thumb.

Jason returned home Monday and will be in town until March 30. He is currently at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, where he is undergoing rehabilitation and treatment.

"I'm done with the surgeries on my hand," he said. Surgeons reattached his right thumb and index finger and had to rebuild the back of his hand with skin grafts. The thumb and the back of his hand are numb and he uses his index finger and middle finger to pick things up.

"I've had a total of nine surgeries," he said. "Seven of those were in the first month after I was hurt."

Jason said he remembers the blast but didn't know the extent of his injuries.

"I didn't know how bad it was because I was wearing a glove when it happened," he said. The right side of his face was swollen and his right hand was heavily bandaged. Jason was awarded the Purple Heart the day after the bombing.



"He didn't understand why everyone kept asking him about his thumb," said his mother Clarice Whaley. Doctors attempted to explain to her, in telephone calls first from Baghdad and then from Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany, what kinds of injuries Jason had suffered.

"Because of how the doctors described it, we thought his face was more severe than his thumb," she said.

It was only after he arrived at Brooke that Jason saw the extent of his injuries. When doctors unwrapped the bandages on his hand and showed him, he was more than surprised.

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Because she did not have a passport at the time, Clarice was not able to travel to Germany to be with her son. She and other family members, including Jason's older brother Jared, flew to San Antonio when Jason was transferred there. Jason's father, Rocky Baldwin, lives in Des Plaines and his grandfather, Glenn Baldwin, lives in Lost Landing, near Dixon.

"We talked to him every day when he was in Germany," Clarice said. "That was more than I'd gotten to talk to him all the time he'd been over there so that was good."

But even though they talked, her son was seriously injured and far away from her. They knew he was headed home but not when, and that was tough.

"Just waiting," she said. "Not knowing when he was going to get home was the hardest part."

Jason lives in the barracks at BAMC and works at a job in the hospital while he recovers. He faces plastic surgery on his face as well as dental work. After all that's happened, he still has a positive outlook. He should be out of the Army in May and plans to attend college to be a paramedic or an EMT.

"I wanted to be a police officer but that's out of the picture now," he said. "I still think I'm very lucky. I consider myself very lucky when I see how badly some of the soldiers down there have been hurt."

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