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Real bullets, real pain, real war

By *DAVE CLARKE* Regional Coordinator

Getting shot in Iraq was the scariest moment of his life and, although he didn't know it then, at the same time it may have also been one of the luckiest.

Spec. Jeremy Wrotny has returned home, the first (and hopefully the last) member of the Galva National Guard unit to be wounded in combat in Iraq.

Wrotny, 24, was on patrol in Baghdad on April 7 with other members of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, based in Galva, when the soft-sided, sandbag-reinforced Humvee in which he was riding came under fire.

During the firefight which followed, Wrotny, who was returning fire with an M-16 rifle, was struck in the lower left jaw by a bullet from an Iraqi insurgent's gun. "It felt like someone had hit me in the cheek with a ball-peen hammer," said Wrotny, now home with his expectant wife on a 30-day convalescent leave and still speaking with some difficulty through a partially wired jaw.

Wrotny, who worked as a bartender in his hometown of LaSalle, enlisted in the National Guard and got married last year, before being called to active duty last fall. Formerly of Tiskilwa and a member of Headquarters Battery of the 202nd ADA in Kewanee, he was one of 22 from the group sent to bring Galva's F Battery up to strength before being sent to Ft. Hood, Texas, for combat training.

The bullet tore a 3 1/2-inch hole in the side of his face, just missing his teeth. The spent slug was found later

in the backpack which had been at his feet where it apparently fell after it cut a hole in his cheek and broke his jaw. "I had to keep spitting up blood so I wouldn't swallow," said Wrotny. "I could feel the bones in my jaw grinding together."

Sgt. Ryan Peterson of LaFayette, who was manning the machine gun mounted in the Humvee, came to his aid, thinking at first Wrotny had been struck in the neck because of the extreme amount of blood everywhere. Peterson then grabbed a bandage and shoved it carefully into his partner's mouth in an effort to stop the bleeding.

"'Pete' tried to help as much as possible, but I knew what I had to do," Wrotny said.

With the help of Peterson and others, Wrotny got out of the firefight, then rushed back to camp where other members of the unit helped him on his way to a field hospital where he underwent basic surgery before being flown to more advanced U.S. medical facilities in Germany. After a short stay, he was then flown on to Walter Reed U.S. Army Medical Center, in Washington, D.C.

Spec. Wrotny considers himself extremely fortunate to be alive. "If the bullet had hit two inches lower, it would have hit my jugular, two inches up or over, and it would have hit me in the head and probably killed me," said Wrotny. He also pointed out that if the incoming bullet had not been deflected by his cheek, it most likely would have hit Sgt. Mark Wildermuth, another member of Headquarters Battery, who was driving the Humvee.

Wrotny said Iraq, where he been for about two weeks, was hot and dry. Asked about any encounters with the Iraqis, Wrotny recalled handing out candy to kids in the street, and narrowly being missed by an explosive device half an hour later. Wrotny said after that, they kept the candy.

He said real combat is nothing like it is portrayed in movies and on television. It hits home when you hear machine gun fire, the bullets start flying in your direction and you realize someone is shooting at you for real, Wrotny said.

Still, the young soldier has no regrets.

"Given the chance, I'd do it all over again," he said.

With medical treatment continuing, Wrotny will eventually return to Fort Hood, home of the 1st Cavalry to which Battery F is attached, where he will receive a medical discharge from military service.

When congratulated, Wrotny shrugged his shoulders slightly and said "I was just doing my job."

The combination of getting married and going through combat has apparently changed the way the young bartender looks at life. Asked if he is going back to tending bar, Wrotny says absolutely not. He's planning to find a career, and buy a house for his bride and new baby. Then, when it's financially possible, he'd like to buy an SUV for his wife, and for himself -- that Harley-Davidson motorcycle he planned to get if he survived a year in Iraq.

I hope Jeremy talks with the parents, spouses and fiancées of those now serving in Iraq whenever he has the chance. He is now a living symbol of the hope that their loved ones will come home.

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