

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 073560220
DATE: 2007.12.22
PAGE: A2 (ILLUS)
BYLINE: CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD
SECTION: Column
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Hamilton ONT
WORDS: 1118
WORD COUNT: 1090

BLATCHFORD'S TAKE: THE AFGHAN MISSION

How Christmas was saved for a paralyzed Canadian soldier

CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD cblatchford@globeandmail.com HAMILTON
When in the vineyards of southern Afghanistan on July 8, 2006, Corporal Chris Klodt was shot, the bullet entered the right side of the front of his neck, pierced the larynx, shattered two vertebrae in his back and crushed his spinal cord, lodging there.

He collapsed, instantly helpless, unable to move anything but his neck, unable even to speak to the mates who saw him go down and were at his side, shouting the sweet nothings ("Hang on, buddy, you're going to be all right") that sustain injured soldiers.

The fight was still raging, so one of his comrades threw him over a shoulder and carried him behind a mud wall, where a pair of medics found him and searched frantically for a wound, and then he was carried out further from the battle on one of those black rubbery ground sheets, his friends actually kicking down a mud wall so they could get him over it, and put on a Black Hawk and flown to the sophisticated hospital at Kandahar Air Field.

Such is the speed of things that within 10 days, two operations later (one each in Kandahar and the U.S. hospital in Landstuhl, Germany), Cpl. Klodt was back in Canada.

Now 25, he has seen his life change dramatically - perhaps irrevocably, although he is considered a prime candidate for the fruits of stem-cell research being done by McMaster University scientists because his spinal cord wasn't actually severed. He was paralyzed from the armpits down, couldn't speak, couldn't eat by himself.

All he cared about was being there when his wife, Deena, gave birth to their first child.

On Sept. 7, two months later almost to the day, Jonathan was born, and Chris Klodt - by then he'd picked up a superbug and was in a little isolation bubble with a team of 10 doctors and nurses - was there to see it.

His recovery has exceeded all medical expectations.

Within about two weeks, he started talking; not much later, he shucked the feeding tube into his stomach and began eating by himself; he has long since abandoned the power chair for a manual one he wheels himself and transfers in and out of on his own. Another chair, which will allow him to "stand" upright and reach the tops of cupboards and the like, is en route

stand upright and reach the tops of cupboards and the like, is en route from France, paid for by the army. He lacks for nothing, he says: "If I even mention it, it's approved [by the army] before I even decide I want it." He is steadily gaining strength in his upper body, and works out three times a week with the MacWheeler, a rehab program at McMaster for those with spinal-cord injuries - even "running" on a treadmill through an apparatus he describes as akin to a big Jolly Jumper that holds him upright while students walk his legs, preserving muscle strength.

His doctors are stunned, he says with a grin, that "I'm not on medication for depression or seeing a psychiatrist or anything .

. . [they said], 'Hmm, something different about you.' " He's working now at learning how to put on his pants - the last real barrier between him and independence - and soon will get his new pickup, a Ford F-150 fitted with hand controls in his favourite colour, "Black, the colour of secrets." Yet the adjustments have been enormous.

A member of the 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, which is based in Shilo, Man., he and Deena bought a house in nearby Brandon when, shortly before the Patricias went to Afghanistan in January of last year, they found out she was pregnant. A social worker with Metis family services in Brandon who loves her job, she is still living there with the baby. She and Chris commute.

"Every other week, either she's here or I'm there," he says. "I should buy a plane, as much flying as I do." Flying is a piece of cake: He just transfers from a special narrow wheelchair onto a seat.

Monday to Friday, he lives in the country of Flamborough Township near Hamilton in a small, wheelchair-accessible house he bought last summer; it is littered with Jonathan's toys. He has a personal support worker, Margie, who keeps him company; an assisting officer, Roy Ramrattan, from the army, who shepherds him through army paperwork and is a regular visitor; and stellar parents, Roy and Joy, who live about 15 minutes away, and who have been a great help. Of Deena, he says simply, "She's a rock. She's incredible." He hasn't a single complaint.

He has no regrets: "You meet the greatest guys, and you can't party any harder." He is a proud Canadian soldier, as a tattoo on his chest reads; he has another, a tiny Canadian Maple Leaf, on the web between thumb and forefinger of his right hand, so it is the first thing anyone shaking his hand sees. He is particularly proud of being a Patricia: "Hell, when it's time to do the business, we can get 'er done." He's always loved a challenge, he says. The injury is just another.

"Yeah, you get shitty days and you get good days and, whatever.

Take the good with the bad, right?" It just kills him, he says, that when the 2nd Battalion returns to Kandahar early next year, he won't be with them.

As for the mission to Afghanistan, he is resolute. "Absolutely worthwhile," he says. "Since when isn't helping people worthwhile? It's that cut and dried.

"People can always say, 'Oh, people are getting hurt doing it.' Well . . . people get hurt building buildings; do we stop? No. You try to make as best as you can. You train people as best you can.

You send them on their way." One of the young medics who helped carry him out the day he was shot is tortured by the notion that perhaps, because they were under fire and couldn't take spinal precautions, they made his injury worse. "There was nothing he could do," Cpl. Klodt says, "because the bullet was already there, it had already crushed my spinal cord.

Putting a neck brace around me wouldn't have done anything. I should call him and tell him." He will spend Christmas in Brandon with Deena and Jonathan, maybe have a drink or two with the boys. The old year will end, for him, with those he most loves and enjoys.

It ends the same way for me, in the always elevating company of a fine Canadian soldier.

Merry Christmas to all of them, and all of you.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM: war veterans; disabled persons; biography; profiles

PERSONAL NAME: Chris Klodt

ORGANIZATION NAME: Armed Forces