



## *Perspective / Opinion*

# **A Day in Logar Province, Afghanistan**

By Lewis B. Somberg, MD

It has been ten years almost to the day that my life and the life of SSG Ben Eberle became intertwined. I had recently arrived at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Shank. The location of this FOB was no mistake. It sat astride of the main road from Kabul and the Pakistan border in the mountains at approximately 8500 ft above sea level. I remember getting winded dragging my gear off the helicopter when I first got there.

As the senior medical officer for the FOB, I triaged every injured soul who showed up at our facility. I was assigned to the 628<sup>th</sup> Forward Surgical Team (FST). We had twenty personnel (two general and one orthopedic surgeon, two CRNAs, three RNs, two LPNs, and ten medics). We were supported by the C (Charlie) Company of 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. They had a two MD's who had completed an internship and a mixture of RNs and medics.

One morning, I received a call on my radio that Dustoff (MEDIVAC helicopter) had been dispatched to a scene where there were troops in contact. We usually had some warning of when and what was on the way although the initial reports were almost never accurate as far as the number of wounded, so we prepared for anything. Later, the MEDIVAC crew gave us a patient report of an American who had stepped on an improved explosive device (IED). He was badly injured and hypotensive.

I was at the helipad when I saw, then heard, the Blackhawk screaming towards us. The pilot wasted no time putting his ship on the ground. As they pulled SSG Eberle off the helicopter, I caught a glimpse of his face. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of that image. He was gray. Now I have been a trauma surgeon for close to thirty years and I have never seen anyone that ashen before or since. Somehow, he was conscious.

He had suffered traumatic amputations of both legs (one above and one below the knee), and his right hand appeared ischemic as well. Knowing the injury patterns inflicted by stepping on an IED, I obtained a chest x-ray and pelvis films which confirmed an open book pelvic fracture.

I directed and participated in both his resuscitation and his follow-on surgery. After we controlled his airway and established access for massive transfusions, we took him to our plywood OR and were able to control all his sources of hemorrhage.

One the most amazing lessons learned from the Global War on Terror was the use Fresh Whole Blood (FWB). I had already activated the walking blood bank. A message went out across the FOB for SSG Eberle's blood type. Within five minutes of when the call for donors went out, so many Soldiers showed up that some were turned away. He received banked components until the first unit of FWB was available. Within twenty-five minutes of Ben's arrival, the first unit of FWB was infusing. His initial base deficit was  $>20$ , however by the end of our procedure it was only minus 2.



As soon as I left the OR, I contacted the ROLE III facility at Bagram Airfield and arranged his transfer to the next higher level of care. He left our facility four hours after arrival and five hours after he was injured via another MEDIVAC Blackhawk. He spent two days at Bagram where his wounds were washed out and his external fixator was placed on pelvis. Despite all our attempts we were unable to salvage his right hand.

He was transferred to Landstuhl Army Hospital in Germany and from there he arrived at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio six days after he was injured and re-united with family.

I received constant follow-up about SSG Eberle and decided to visit him in Texas when I redeployed. Ben's wife, Ashley had become pregnant before he left and delivered a baby girl on the day I arrived. I told them over the phone that I didn't want to bother them on such a special day, however they protested saying I was now family. His mother wouldn't let go of me and Ashley bluntly said without me this day would have "sucked." After a long rehabilitation, he was medically retired and returned to his home state of Michigan.



While SSG Eberle obtained just about as good as a result that could be hoped for given his injuries, I assure you that I am haunted by many who did not survive or chose to take their own lives. Watching Afghanistan revert to Taliban rule was especially hard but totally predictable. It leaves all of us who fought there wondering whether the sacrifice was worth it. Nation building is not really the job of the Department of Defense, but it seems we have been called to more and more of it lately. While

I think it is obvious that the withdraw could have been executed better, I firmly believe that it was past time to end our involvement there.

As I look back on my military career, I am honored and proud to have served. I was able to interact, train and fight with many of our country's real heroes. I was honored to train medics in the Army's elite counter terrorism unit for several years. I commanded troops at every level from Detachment (twenty Soldiers) to Brigade (2700 Soldiers) and obtained a masters degree from the US Army War College.

It was not without cost. The statistics for deployed Soldiers whose marriages ended are staggering and my family is part of that number. It affected my academic career, as it took my focus away from it.

But there were rewards as well. I met my current spouse in Iraq. I strived to make every Soldier under my command better than me so the Army would have strong leadership in the future.

Each of us who served make a commitment to something higher than ourselves. All of us have sacrificed something for our country, and whether or not we may think it was worth it or not, I am pretty sure we would do it again.

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