

## Brain injuries afflicting Iraq war veterans

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by Katherine head |

When Alec Giess returned from the war in Iraq, he was a changed man. An accident that nearly claimed his life forever altered his day-to-day existence, but the reason was not immediately identified.

More and more soldiers are returning from the war with traumatic brain injuries. Known as the "silent epidemic," brain injuries have been notoriously difficult to identify, and consequently understanding their repercussions is an ongoing process. Alec Giess was one such soldier, and his story reflects the struggle many are having to endure.

Born in Portland, Alec had spent his formative years in the Pacific Northwest. He spent his junior and senior years at Seaside High School. Alec joined the Army National Guard in 1980 when he was 20 years old.

"I joined because a friend talked me into it," he said. "And as soon as he could, he got out."

But Alec chose to stay. He didn't receive orders for active duty until February of 2003. Shana explained they received the call on a Sunday night. He had been chosen to fill in a spot on another team. He went to Salem the next day and was shipped out for training at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs the following Monday.

"I guess it was a good thing we didn't have time to dwell on it," Shana said.

Alec landed in Kuwait on April 20, 2003. He was a sergeant first-class with a squad of combat engineers sent in to support the 101st Airborne combat infantry near Mosul, Iraq. As such, he and his crew cleared areas and started the reconstruction process.

"We worked with Iraqis after to teach them how to rebuild," Alec noted.

Alec said that initially the Iraqi people were warm and receptive to U.S. troops.

"They were waving American flags and standing on the streets in every town we rolled through," he said. "When they realized we weren't leaving, they started getting pissy."

He added that his team was only supposed to be in Iraq until July. "That didn't happen," Alec said.

After a training mission on Dec. 16, 2003, Alec was riding in a five-ton truck when they were separated from the lead part of the convoy. The truck hit an oil slick from a previous accident and flipped. Alec was ejected and the truck landed on top of him, killing the driver.

"They said he looked like the wicked Witch of the West," Shana said.

Had it not been for his body armor, which his unit had just received, the accident probably would have killed Alec. Instead, he was left with a broken back.

Shana, who works at Seaside Middle School, received a satellite phone call concerning the accident. "At first they said he just had a broken collarbone," she said.

Alec was transported to Germany, where it was discovered he had a broken vertebrae. He was returned to Colorado Springs, and was flown home two days before New Year's.

"There was no briefing for the family on how to deal with someone who has been in a combat zone," Shana noted. "When he was home, we noticed something wasn't quite right."

Alec had to return to Colorado Springs to await the return of his unit. The wait would last a couple of months. In that time he purchased a car to get around, but then forgot he bought it. He began to miss appointments. Although an MRI had been administered, no indications of a problem were spotted.

Alec returned home to Oregon with his unit, and traveled to Fort Lewis in Washington to undergo neurological tests. Then it was discovered. The accident had left him with a damaged frontal lobe, the part of the brain that handles executive thinking, reason and some memory.

With his traumatic brain injury diagnosis, Alec was sent to Palo Alto, Calif. for proper rehabilitation. The process included speech therapy, physical therapy and relearning activities like driving and reading.

Coupled with the brain injury, Alec was also diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He became very temperamental and would tire easily. Mental fatigue is something he will deal with for the rest of his life. After six months in California, Alec returned home to Shana and their two children, Simone and Spencer. The family has undergone therapy to adjust to the way Alec is now as a husband and a father.

"I have good days and bad days," he relayed. "A bad day is a total brain injury day—you just don't feel good and you have no motivation."

Alec has also had to readjust. Once a home builder, he now doesn't feel able to hold down a job.

"I want to go out and get a job, but it's impossible," he said. "I wouldn't be a very good employee."

He added he worries about safety, as he sometimes leaves the stove on or forgets a task.

"I'm second-guessing myself all the time," he said.

Even so, he says the day-to-day stuff is getting better. He and Shana have developed a system to keep Alec on track. After two decades of marriage, Shana attributes the longevity of their relationship with its survival. Therapy and family rehabilitation have been contributing factors to what Shana calls the "new normal."

"If we hadn't have had therapy, we would have been separated," Alec said. "I would have just been a dysfunctional veteran."

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