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Canadian 'miracle' soldier mends

Two brain surgeries after friendly fire
By SARAH GREEN, TORONTO SUN

Bruce Moncur's survival is a miracle.

But the 22-year-old corporal, injured in last week's friendly fire incident in Afghanistan that killed one soldier and injured more than 30 others, shuns any suggestion he's a hero.

"They all call me a hero, but I don't feel it all," Moncur said yesterday in an exclusive interview with the Toronto Sun. "I feel like normal Bruce from Windsor. The miracle thing sounds a little better."

There's a scar shaped like a comma above his ear after two brain surgeries -- one in Afghanistan, one in Germany -- to repair the damage caused by shrapnel. Moncur -- released yesterday from Sunnybrook hospital, anxious to go home -- also suffered wounds to his buttocks and lower back.

He will need therapy to help with his balance and difficulty he's having with handwriting and remembering numbers.

Yet his family and friends were relieved to see his smile and good humour intact, to see "Bruce was still Bruce," said his best friend, Tyler Millman, who joined the reserves with Moncur five years ago.

"He's one of the lucky ones. He's getting better every day. He's young and strong," said his aunt Marg Moncur, who learned of her nephew's injuries when he called her from his overseas hospital bed. It's a conversation he doesn't remember.

His doctors said "he's a miracle. He's definitely a miracle." Moncur's commitment to his fellow soldiers -- his friends, his brothers -- is also unshaken. "If I could be back with the boys, I would."

It was 5:30 a.m. last Monday when two A-10 Thunderbolts, the U.S. jets dubbed Warthogs with their distinctive roar, opened fire on the Canadian camp.

Moncur's company was already reeling from the deaths of four soldiers the previous day during a ground assault on Taliban insurgents.

"The next day, we were soldiers," Moncur said. "It's time to do our job."

The soldiers were burning boxes as they prepared to fold their camp. They initially didn't believe the bullets were coming from the skies.

"We thought we put ammunition in the fire," he recalled.

His memories are blurry from there. He remembered flying through air and a searing pain in his head and arm.

In those first terrible, confusing moments, he thought he lost the limb, but it turned out to be okay.

"It was right out of a movie," Moncur said. "It was pandemonium. It was like Saving Private Ryan. Bodies everywhere."

Waterloo's Ryan Pagnacco, 27, suffered deep wounds in his arm, legs and back in the attack.

"I tried to crawl my way out of the area," recalled Pagnacco, dressed in an "Army" T-shirt in his room



Canadian Cpl. Bruce Moncur he awaits his release yesterday from Toronto's Sunnybrook hospital(Ernest Doroszuk/Toronto Sun)

at Sunnybrook. Like Moncur, he was anxious to get home.

"Everyone was on the ground. Everyone took cover. There was people lying everywhere."

Soldiers scrambled to help the wounded. One bandaged Moncur's injuries while Pagnacco credited another with saving his life, wrapping tourniquets around his legs and arm

Asked about the friendly fire incident, Moncur said simply it is an unfortunate reality of war. "It sucks to get hit like that. Sometimes it happens."

Moncur praised the care he received here at home and abroad. In Germany, staff even fetched him McDonalds, a "Royale with cheese," he said with a smile, citing the hamburger made famous in the movie Pulp Fiction.

Later this month, he'll see his beloved Detroit Tigers at a game with his best friend and he's planning to get a tattoo on his left shoulder -- his right bears a Maple Leaf -- of an eight ball. His platoon was called the Crazy Eights and the tattoo will include the name of two soldiers from the platoon, Frank Mellish and Mark Graham, killed during those two awful days.

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