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In Combat, Marine Put Theory To Test, Saves Lives

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AL QA'IM, Iraq -- Early this spring, Cpl. Jason Dunham and two other Marines sat in an outpost traded theories on surviving a hand-grenade attack.

Second Lt. Brian "Bull" Robinson suggested that if a Marine lay face down on the grenade and held between his forearms, the ceramic bulletproof plate in his flak vest might be strong enough to protect vital organs. His arms would shatter, but he might live.

Cpl. Dunham had another idea: A Marine's Kevlar helmet held over the grenade might contain the bet a Kevlar would stop it," he said, according to Second Lt. Robinson.

"No, it'll still mess you up," Staff Sgt. John Ferguson recalls saying.

It was a conversation the men would remember vividly a few weeks later, when they saw the shr remains of Cpl. Dunham's helmet, apparently blown apart from the inside by a grenade. Fellow M believe Cpl. Dunham's actions saved the lives of two men and have recommended him for the Me Honor, an award that no act of heroism since 1993 has garnered.

A 6-foot-1 star high-school athlete from Scio, N.Y., Cpl. Dunham was chosen to become a squad I shortly after he was assigned to Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment in Sept 2003. Just 22 years old, he showed "the kind of leadership where you're confident in your abilities have to yell about it," says Staff Sgt. Ferguson, 30, of Aurora, Colo. Cpl. Dunham's reputation gre extended his enlistment, due to end in July, so he could stay with his squad throughout its tour in zone.

During the invasion of Iraq last year, the Third Battalion didn't suffer any combat casualties. But s 10 of its 900 Marines have died from hostile fire, and 89 have been wounded.

April 14 was an especially bad day. Cpl. Dunham was in the town of Karabilah, leading a 14-man to scout sites for a new base, when radio reports came pouring in about a roadside bomb hitting a group of Marines not far away.

Insurgents, the reports said, had ambushed a convoy that included the battalion commander, 40-Col. Matthew Lopez, of Chicago. One rifle shot penetrated the rear of the commander's Humvee, I in the back, Lt. Col. Lopez says. His translator and bodyguard, Lance Cpl. Akram Falah, 23, of An Calif., had taken a bullet to the bicep, severing an artery, according to medical reports filed later.

Cpl. Dunham's patrol jumped aboard some Humvees and raced toward the convoy. Near the douk gateway of the town of Husaybah, they heard the distinctive whizzing sound of a rocket-propelled overhead. They left their vehicles and split into two teams to hunt for the shooters, according to i with two men who were there and written reports from two others.

Around 12:15 p.m., Cpl. Dunham's team came to an intersection and saw a line of seven Iraqi ve a dirt alleyway, according to Staff Sgt. Ferguson and others there. At Staff Sgt. Ferguson's instruc

started checking the vehicles for weapons.

Cpl. Dunham approached a run-down white Toyota Land Cruiser. The driver, an Iraqi in a black t-shirt and jeans, immediately lunged out and grabbed the corporal by the throat, according to men at the scene. Dunham knelt the man in the chest, and the two tumbled to the ground.

Two other Marines rushed to the scene. Private First Class Kelly Miller, 21, of Eureka, Calif., ran to the passenger side of the vehicle and put a choke hold around the man's neck. But the Iraqi continued his struggle, according to a military report Pfc. Miller gave later. Lance Cpl. William B. Hampton, 22, of Woodinville, Wash., also ran to help.

A few yards away, Lance Cpl. Jason Sanders, 21, a radio operator from McAlester, Okla., says he saw Dunham yell a warning: "No, no, no -- watch his hand!"

What was in the Iraqi's hand appears to have been a British-made "Mills Bomb" hand grenade. The Marines later found an unexploded Mills Bomb in the Toyota, along with AK-47 assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

A Mills Bomb user pulls a ring pin out and squeezes the external lever -- called the spoon -- until it is ready to throw it. Then he releases the spoon, leaving the bomb armed. Typically, three to five seconds pass between the time the spoon detaches and the grenade explodes. The Marines later found what they believe to have been the grenade's pin on the floor of the Toyota, suggesting that the Iraqi had the grenade in his hand -- on a hair trigger -- even as he wrestled with Cpl. Dunham.

None of the other Marines saw exactly what Cpl. Dunham did, or even saw the grenade. But they believe Dunham spotted the grenade -- prompting his warning cry -- and, when it rolled loose, placed his body on top of it to protect his squadmates.

The scraps of Kevlar found later, scattered across the street, supported their conclusion. The grenades, they think, must have been inside the helmet when it exploded. His fellow Marines believe that Cpl. Dunham made an instantaneous decision to try out his theory that a helmet might blunt the grenade blast.

"I deeply believe that given the facts and evidence presented he clearly understood the situation and attempted to block the blast of the grenade from his squad members," Lt. Col. Lopez wrote in a memo recommending Cpl. Dunham for the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for military valor. "His personal action was far beyond the call of duty and saved the lives of his fellow Marines."

Recommendations for the Medal of Honor are rare. The Marines say they have no other candidate for approval. Unlike other awards, the Medal of Honor must be approved by the president. The most recent act of heroism to earn the medal came 11 years ago, when two Army Delta Force soldiers gave their lives protecting a downed Blackhawk helicopter pilot in Somalia.

Staff Sgt. Ferguson was crossing the street to help when the grenade exploded. He recalls feeling a sharp punch in his chest that reminded him of being close to the starting line when dragsters gun their engines. Lance Cpl. Sanders, approaching the scene, was temporarily deafened, he says. He assumed all the other Marines and the Iraqi must surely be dead.

In fact, the explosion left Cpl. Dunham unconscious and face down in his own blood, according to Sanders. He says the Iraqi lay on his back, bleeding from his midsection.

The fight wasn't over, however. To Lance Cpl. Sanders's surprise, the Iraqi got up and ran. Lance Cpl. Sanders says he raised his rifle and fired 25 shots at the man's back, killing him.

The other two Marines were injured, but alive. Lance Cpl. Hampton was spitting up blood and had shrapnel embedded in his left leg, knee, arm and face, according to a military transcript. Pfc. Miller's arms

perforated by shrapnel. Yet both Marines struggled to their feet and staggered back toward the cc

"Cpl. Dunham was in the middle of the explosion," Pfc. Miller told a Marine officer weeks later, aft
Lance Cpl. Hampton were evacuated to the U.S. to convalesce. "If it was not for him, none of us v
here. He took the impact of the explosion."

At first, Lance Cpl. Mark Edward Dean, a 22-year-old mortarman, didn't recognize the wounded M
loaded into the back of his Humvee. Blood from shrapnel wounds in the Marine's head and neck h
his face. Then Lance Cpl. Dean spotted the tattoo on his chest -- an Ace of Spades and a skull -- ;
he was looking at one of his closest friends, Cpl. Dunham. A volunteer firefighter back home in Ov
Okla., Lance Cpl. Dean says he knew from his experience with car wrecks that his friend had a be
of surviving if he stayed calm.

"You're going to be all right," Lance Cpl. Dean remembers saying as the Humvee sped back to car
going to get you home."

When the battalion was at its base in Twentynine Palms, Calif., the two Marines had played pool a
out with Lance Cpl. Dean's wife, Becky Jo, at the couple's nearby home. Once in a while, Lance Cpl
says they'd round up friends, drive to Las Vegas and lose some money at the roulette tables. Sho
the battalion left Kuwait for Iraq, Lance Cpl. Dean ran short of cash. He says Cpl. Dunham bought
minute phone card so he could call Becky Jo. He used every minute.

At battalion headquarters in al Qa'im, Chaplain David Slater was in his makeshift chapel -- in a str
down Iraqi train car with red plastic chairs as pews -- when he heard an Army Blackhawk helicopt
The 46-year-old Navy chaplain from Lincoln, Neb. knew that meant the shock-trauma platoon wo
receive fresh casualties.

Shortly afterward, the helicopter arrived. Navy corpsmen and Marines carried Cpl. Dunham's stret
feet to the medical tent, its green floor and white walls emitting a rubbery scent, clumps of stethc
hanging like bananas over olive-drab trunks of chest tubes, bandages and emergency airway tube

The bearers rested the corporal's stretcher on a pair of black metal sawhorses. A wounded Iraqi fi
stripped naked on the next stretcher -- standard practice for all patients, according to the medica
ensure no injury goes unnoticed. The Iraqi had plastic cuffs on his ankles and was on morphine to
according to medical personnel who were there.

When a wounded Marine is conscious, Chaplain Slater makes small talk -- asks his name and how
help keep the patient calm and alert even in the face of often-horrific wounds. Chaplain Slater say
to Cpl. Dunham, held his hand and prayed. But he saw no sign that the corporal heard a word. Af
minutes or so, he says, he moved on to another Marine.

At the same time, the medical team worked to stabilize Cpl. Dunham. One grenade fragment had
the left side of his skull not far behind his eye, says Navy Cmdr. Ed Hessel, who treated him. A se
entered the brain slightly higher and further toward the back of his head. A third punctured his ne

Cmdr. Hessel, a 44-year-old emergency-room doctor from Eugene, Ore., quickly concluded that th
was "unarousable." A calm, bespectacled man, he says he wanted to relieve the corporal's brain a
the effort required to breathe. And he wanted to be sure the corporal had no violent physical reac
might add to the pressure on his already swollen brain.

Navy Lt. Ted Hering, a 27-year-old critical-care nurse from San Diego, inserted an intravenous dr
in drugs to sedate the corporal, paralyze his muscles and blunt the gag response in his throat whi
breathing tube was inserted and manual ventilator attached. The Marine's heart rate and blood pr
stabilized, according to Cmdr. Hessel. But a field hospital in the desert didn't have the resources t
any further.

So Cpl. Dunham was put on another Blackhawk to take him to the Seventh Marines' base at Al Asad, a transfer point for casualties heading on to the military surgical hospital in Baghdad. During the flight, the corporal lay on the top stretcher. Beneath him was the Iraqi, with two tubes protruding from his chest to keep his lungs from collapsing. Lt. Hering stood next to the stretchers, squeezing a plastic bag every five seconds to press air into Cpl. Dunham's lungs.

The Iraqi, identified in battalion medical records only as POW#1, repeatedly asked for water until seven minutes before landing, when Cpl. Dunham's blood-drenched head bandage burst, sending a cascade of blood through the mesh stretcher and onto the Iraqi's face below. After that, the man remained motionless. He kept his eyes and mouth clenched shut, says the nurse, Lt. Hering.

The Army air crew made the trip in 25 minutes, their fastest run ever, according to the pilot, and no higher than 50 feet off the ground to avoid changes in air pressure that might put additional strain on Dunham's brain.

When the Blackhawk touched down at Al Asad, Cpl. Dunham was turned over to new caretakers. The Blackhawk promptly headed back to al Qa'im. More patients were waiting; 10 Marines from the 1st Marine Battalion were wounded on April 14, along with a translator.

At 11:45 p.m. that day, Deb and Dan Dunham were at home in Scio, N.Y., a town of 1,900, when they got the phone call all military parents dread. It was a Marine lieutenant telling them their son had sustained shrapnel wounds to the head, was unconscious and in critical condition.

Mr. Dunham, 43, an Air Force veteran, works in the shipping department of a company that makes heaters, and Mrs. Dunham, 44, teaches home economics. She remembers helping her athletic son learn to spell as a young boy by playing "PIG" and "HORSE" -- traditional basketball shootouts -- and expanding the games to include other words. He never left home or hung up the phone with his mother, "I love you," she says.

The days that followed were filled with uncertainty, fear and hope. The Dunhams knew their son was in a hospital in Baghdad, then in Germany, where surgeons removed part of his skull to relieve the swelling inside. At one point doctors upgraded his condition from critical to serious.

On April 21, the Marines gave the Dunhams plane tickets from Rochester to Washington, and put them up at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., where their son was going to be transferred. Mrs. Dunham brought along the first Harry Potter novel, so she and her husband could take turns reading to their son, just to let him know they were there.

When Cpl. Dunham arrived that night, the doctors told the couple he had taken a turn for the worse. He had a fever on the flight from Germany. After an hour by their son's side, Mr. Dunham says he had a "gut feeling" that the outlook was bleak. Mrs. Dunham searched for signs of hope, planning to ask relatives to bring two more Harry Potter books, in case they finished the first one. Doctors urged the Dunhams to get some rest.

They were getting dressed the next morning when the intensive-care unit called to say the hospital was sending a car for them. "Jason's condition is very, very grim," Mrs. Dunham remembers a doctor saying. "I have to tell you the outlook isn't very promising."

She says doctors told her the shrapnel had traveled down the side of his brain, and the damage was irreversible. He would always be on a respirator. He would never hear his parents or know they were on his side. Another operation to relieve pressure on his brain had little chance of succeeding and a significant chance of killing him.

Once he joined the Marines, Cpl. Dunham put his father in charge of medical decisions and asked

be kept on life support if there was no hope of recovery, says Mr. Dunham. He says his son told him "don't leave me like that."

The Dunhams went for a walk on the hospital grounds. When they returned to the room, Cpl. Dunham's condition had deteriorated, his mother says. Blood in his urine signaled failing kidneys, and one leg collapsed as the other was filling with fluid. Mrs. Dunham says they took the worsening symptoms as their son's way of telling them they should follow through on his wishes.

At the base in al Qa'im, Second Lt. Robinson, 24, of Kenosha, Wis., gathered the men of Cpl. Dunham's platoon in the sleeping area, a spread of cots, backpacks, CD players and rifles, its plywood walls lined with magazine shots of scantily clad women. The lieutenant says he told the Marines of the Dunhams' decision to remove their son's life support in two hours' time.

Lance Cpl. Dean wasn't the only Marine who cried. He says he prayed that some miracle would happen in the next 120 minutes. He prayed that God would touch his friend and wake him up so he could live the life he had wanted to lead.

In Bethesda, the Dunhams spent a couple more hours with their son. Marine Corps Commandant Hagee arrived and pinned the Purple Heart, awarded to those wounded in battle, on his pillow. Mr. Dunham cried on Gen. Hagee's shoulder. The Dunhams stepped out of the room while the doctors removed the ventilator.

At 4:43 p.m. on April 22, 2004, Marine Cpl. Jason L. Dunham died.

Six days later, Third Battalion gathered in the parking lot outside the al Qa'im command post for a memorial ceremony. In a traditional combat memorial, one Marine plunged a rifle, bayonet-first, into a sand pit. Another placed a pair of tan combat boots in front, and a third perched a helmet on the rifle's stock. Cpl. Dean told those assembled about a trip to Las Vegas the two men and Becky Jo Dean had taken in January, not long before the battalion left for the Persian Gulf. Chatting in a hotel room, the corps friends he was planning to extend his enlistment and stay in Iraq for the battalion's entire tour. "I was thinking about extending," Lance Cpl. Dean recalls saying. "Why?"

He says Cpl. Dunham responded: "I want to make sure everyone makes it home alive. I want to go home to your wife alive."

