

Wounded Army Capt. Jae Barclay's recovery and courage celebrated on this Veteran's Day

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By **Mark McCarter, The Huntsville Times**

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. -- He remembers the explosion's initial shock, being thrown from a Humvee on a godforsaken road in Afghanistan when a land mine exploded under the wheel.

He remembers "being engulfed in flames and wondering if I'm going to make it or not." Then came the survival instincts, trying to snuff out the flames as gunfire erupted around him. He scrambled from one vehicle to the next, then couldn't even use a weapon in a 2 1/2-hour firefight because "the skin was coming off my hands, like a snake's does."

It was August 19, 2006.

It was Capt. Jae Barclay's first wedding anniversary. Seven days later, wife Sierra would give birth to their first daughter, Addison.

By then, Barclay was drifting in and out of drug-induced unconsciousness. He had been airlifted from Afghanistan to Germany, then to San Antonio. En route to the U.S. on a hospital transport plane, he flatlined. He spent three weeks in intensive care with burns over 40 percent of his body; 35 percent were third-degree.

Today, Barclay, a 29-year-old who lives in Hampton Cove and works as a program manager for Science Engineering Services, will be riding another elaborate vehicle.

He's one of a group of wounded soldiers representing an organization called Operation Mend in the Veterans Day parade in New York City. They'll be accompanying a specially designed, eye-catching 2011 Chevy Camaro with a camo paint job that recently sold for \$330,000 at the Mecum Auto Auction.

As New York parade-goers offer their appreciation for him and his colleagues, Barclay will have his own sense of gratitude.

"Nowadays (being a veteran) is a cool thing to be," Barclay said. "I'm blessed. Those guys in the Vietnam days are paving the way for us. They're making sure what happened to them doesn't happen to us, and I'm grateful and indebted. It's a total opposite (from the Vietnam era) to where everybody loves the soldiers, whether they agree with the war or not. I think it's awesome."

Operation Mend is a non-profit program established at UCLA Medical Center in conjunction with the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and the Veterans Administration to help wounded soldiers. More than 40 patients have gone through the program.

Barclay was recommended to Operation Mend in 2008 after the "long process of rehab and different surgeries that were needed to put me back together again." It was often excruciating because of the many skin grafts and constantly frustrating.

"It puts a strain on your family," he said. "One year into our marriage and to have a newborn, be all gimped-up and burned, and my wife has to be the main caregiver for me. We've gone through more than most anybody will ever go through in a five-year period."

On his first consultation at Operation Mend, Dr. Timothy Miller took him to an In-and-Out Burger in L.A. So severely burned was his face, he couldn't open his mouth wide enough to eat a hamburger. Said Barclay, "I couldn't eat anything larger than a grape."

Miller promised burgers - and more. He's delivered. A second surgeon, Dr. Kodi Azari, is operating on Barclay's hands to improve their grip and flexibility. He's lost track at more than 20 surgeries.

Barclay - the Jae is a nickname for James Oliver Barclay IV - is a military man through DNA. His father is Army Gen. James Barclay III, who grew up in Scottsboro. Jae attended North Georgia College on an ROTC scholarship.

Gen. Barclay and his wife, Debbie, were on the harrowing flight from Germany when Jae almost died. That trip, the elder Barclay got some sage advice from a long-time acquaintance: "You're not a general anymore. You're a dad."

There's now a James Oliver Barclay V. They call him Quenton. He's 2 1/2. He's surrounded by two sisters, Addison, now five, and four-month-old Emerson. Said Jae, "We have a rambunctious household."

Though he has a couple of surgeries left on his face and hands and he is left with permanent scarring, normalcy has returned. He's back playing high-70s golf, albeit with tennis grips on his clubs, and he's playing in a men's ice hockey league.

"I've gone through the whole gamut of emotions," Barclay said. "You start off feeling, 'Why me? How could this happen to me?' Then you go into, 'Am I going to be normal?' And I've come to the realization I'm damn lucky to be alive. I realize after it happened, I used to blow through things and not stop to look at anything. I'm taking life a little slower."

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