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Soldier Survives Miracle Head Wound

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Panjwa'i District, AFGHANISTAN – Warriors are famous for their superstitions. They train tirelessly to prepare for any eventuality, but like athletes and gamblers, Soldiers still believe in luck. Most people can't appreciate the role luck plays in war. A misplaced step, a five-minute delay...there are millions of tiny little factors that can make the difference between life and death. Sometimes, it can come down to millimeters.

1st Lt. James Elkins is a lucky man. He found out first-hand how fickle fortune can be on the battlefield. "I still can't believe it, how close I came to dying."

Early on the morning of March 7, Elkins, a platoon leader with the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division was a month into his first deployment and still getting to know the platoon. He and his soldiers set out to conduct a routine clearing operation, a type of combat patrol. Although this was only Elkins' third patrol with his platoon, the men were intimately familiar with the area they were searching, they had covered it dozens of time. As they crossed the familiar, rugged terrain toward their objective, weighed down by their heavy gear, they surveyed the area. They searched for anything out of the ordinary, tell-tale signs of IED's, people or vehicles that didn't belong; anything seemingly out of place. They were looking for signs that they might find trouble. They found it.

The platoon uncovered three pressure plate IED's and went about blowing them up in place. As they dealt with the dangerous explosives, hidden insurgent snipers began firing at their position. The soldiers took cover until the threat diminished, then finished removing the threatening roadside bombs. Once cleared, they moved to investigate a nearby series of farm buildings.

The second building in the chain was distant and exposed. Elkins, still concerned about the sniper threat, directed his team to cover, then took a small, 4-man element to search the second building.

"Once the route was cleared we began to search the compounds. The second building was a grape hut out in a field to the south. It was in a very vulnerable location so I decided to only take a small element out from cover," recounted Elkins. "We moved up and cleared the perimeter around the building for any command wired IED's. We moved up to the door, and realized it was locked, so I had a Soldier breach it. As soon as he did, small arms fire opened up on us. As I turned and pushed my men into the room for cover, I was shot."

The bullet struck him in the back of the head and knocked him off his feet.

"The impact of the round into my jaw hit like a sledgehammer and dropped me to my knees," said Elkins.

Reacting quickly, with no thought to the extent of his injury, Lt. Elkins let his Ranger training take over and dealt with the threat immediately.

"I got back up and returned fire and took cover in the building," said Elkins. "Pfc. Dominguez got on my radio and called the medic. He rushed to the building and patched me up and I walked to the covering position to wait for the MEDEVAC."

He was rushed by helicopter to the NATO Role 3 Hospital at Kandahar Airfield (KAF). The details of his injury are hard to believe.

"The bullet entered through the back of my neck, missed my main artery and spine, passed under my ear and through my jaw joint and exited between my mouth and eye."

What's even more unbelievable is the fact that he was barely wounded.

"When I entered the grape hut, Lt. Elkins was on his side just inside the doorway," recounted Sgt. Genaro Negrete, a San Francisco native and the combat medic for 1st Platoon. "I stepped over and asked some of the soldiers with him what his injuries were. One of the Soldiers said 'his face.' When I rolled him towards me to get a look at the wound, I could see that the bleeding was getting into his mouth. I rolled him back to his side and told him to spit it all up, to ensure he wasn't swallowing any of the blood. He complied immediately, and that's when I knew he was still responsive."

"Once the MEDEVAC landed, I walked over to my CO (commanding officer) shook his hand and climbed on the bird," said Elkins. "Upon touching down on KAF, I stepped off the Blackhawk and climbed into the ambulance. They drove me to the hospital where I walked into the trauma room, holding my IV above my head. I handed it to a nurse and sat down on a litter."

After being treated at KAF, he was flown to Bagram Air Field, and then immediately to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. He underwent five hours of surgery to repair his jaw in Germany, and within a day was flown to Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio.

"I lost the use of my right ear and broke my jaw," said Elkins. "They installed two titanium plates, eight screws and (I have) about 40 stitches. Swelling is the only nuisance."

Elkins' wife, Megan talked about her reaction when she learned the news of her husband's injury. "After I got the news that my husband had been shot I went straight into panic mode, but I knew he would be able to stay strong with all the surgeries and pain. It will be a long road to recovery but I am very thankful for how lucky he was!"

When asked about the incident, and what was going through his mind, Elkins said, "The best feeling in the world was climbing onto that MEDEVAC Blackhawk, looking around and realizing that I was the only one and that none of my men had been hit."

As for how he's doing now, "I'm doing great," he says. "Walking to all my appointments and spending time with my family. I'm just taking antibiotics. I refused pain meds after surgery in Germany. Now, I'm just waiting to get back to 1st Platoon, 'The Other Guys'."

For information regarding this release please contact 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division (Task Force Arctic Wolves) Public Affairs Officer Maj. David Mattox at david.a.mattox@us.army.mil.

Does he think luck had anything to do with his good fortune? “I don’t know, but everyone keeps telling me I should be buying lottery tickets.”

Yeah, he probably should.

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1st Lt. James Elkins on patrol in southern Kandahar Province, Afghanistan.
(Photo Courtesy of 1st Lt. James Elkins)



1st Lt. James Elkins, a platoon leader with 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment interacts with local Afghan children during patrol in southern Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. (Photo Courtesy of 1st Lt. James Elkins)

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