



**By Dave Vrbas**

***The Wauneta Breeze***

Landon Lemburg said Jan. 7 started out just like any other day in Iraq.

Unfortunately, the ordinary didn't last long.

He and his company, assigned to keep watch over the Iraqi elections, had been patrolling polling spots in the city of Bayji in north-central Iraq for a month since their deployment on Dec. 7, 2008.

"Our mission was to make sure things were going smoothly," Lemburg said, explaining his unit's assignment. "Making sure no one was messing with or intimidating voters."

Exactly one month after setting foot on Iraqi sand, Lemburg and the rest of his company had been checking polling sites on Tampa Street for all of 15 minutes when they were ambushed by an insurgent in the crowd while crossing Market Street, Bayji's most dangerous street.

The insurgent, who still remains at large and Lemburg said will likely never be apprehended, flung an RKG-3—known as an 'anti-tank grenade' for its four-panelled drogue parachute that deploys, stabilizing the grenade and ensuring that it strikes the target at a 90 degree angle, maximizing the effect of the shaped charge—at their truck.

Their MRAP vehicle (MRAP stands for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) was pierced by the modern grenade, which then passed through the radios, went through their driver's leg, then exited the other side of the truck, a mere three feet from Lemburg.

"It was so loud, and happened so fast we didn't even see it coming," Lemburg explained.

The seven men in the truck—the driver, tactical commander, gunner and four dismounts like Lemburg—all took shrapnel throughout their bodies, but it was the driver, SPC Bobby Andrzejczak of Cape May, N.J., who was obviously the most badly in need of medical aid. With his leg blown off by the grenade, he was bleeding profusely and near death.

Stranded on the city's most dangerous street, all of them injured by shrapnel and vulnerable to further attack with their gunner down, Lemburg said they had to assess the situation and prioritize.

"It was like the worst horror movie you've ever seen in your life," he said.

Another dismount, Ira Dempcy of Beaver City—cousin of Amy Vrbas of Palisade—was the first to be able to get to Andrzejczak. With no tourniquet available yet and stuck in the back of the MRAP, Dempcy clamped his large hands on Andrzejczak's leg, creating a makeshift human tourniquet.

With Dempcy tending to their driver in the back of the demolished truck, Lemburg rounded up a cloth tourniquet which the two applied to Andrzejczak's leg so he could be transferred by Army helicopter.

Since they were only about a half-mile from their inner-city base, the military put up 360 degrees of security for their company within several minutes, but Lemburg stressed that it felt like a lifetime. He said within 15 minutes all seven of them were on a helicopter making a beeline to the military hospital.

"We had no idea if Andrzejczak was going to make it," Lemburg said. "We were all hurt pretty bad, but he was all we were worried about."

Andrzejczak's leg injury required further amputation, but as soon as it appeared that he would survive and they were taken off commo blackout—the military's way of keeping family members from hearing of a soldier's death from anyone other than a member of a Notification Team—the soldiers could finally use the phone and Internet. Lemburg was then able to make the call to his mother.

"Mom knew by the tone of my voice that something was wrong," he said. "That was a tough phone call."

Andrzejczak had survived his potentially-fatal injury, thanks to the heroism of his southwest Nebraska-native dismounts.

Soon after the incident, he was featured briefly on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" when she visited Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. where he had been transferred. He even took his first step post-amputation on her show.

Lemburg said his company remains in frequent contact with Andrzejczak.

"We talk to him quite a bit," Lemburg said. "We just wish he could still be with us out there."

Just 20 days after taking shrapnel to his legs, Lemburg—along with the rest of his company, minus Andrzejczak—were back on patrol in Bayji. In February, they were each presented with the Purple Heart military decoration. Dempcy also received the Bronze Star medal, the military's fourth-highest combat award, for his bravery.

Lemburg, though honored to receive the Purple Heart, stressed that it's the one medal he hoped he'd never have to earn.

"I'd give it back in a heartbeat for everyone's injuries," he said.

Although he still has some shrapnel in his thigh that causes intermittent pain, the pieces once lodged in his knees and shins have worked themselves out through his skin.

"There's still some in there," he joked. "Just enough to really annoy airport security."

Lemburg was granted leave and returned to Wauneta on May 15, the same day his niece, Lileigh Pearl, was born to sister RanDee and her husband, Jasen Littrel.

Last week, Lemburg was working on getting an extension granted to his leave so he could be present for his mother's heart surgery. Although he'd like to just stay in Nebraska permanently, he doesn't regret having to return to Iraq for the rest of the summer and part of the fall.

"I've gotta keep doing my job. My buddies are all out on patrol, and that's where I need to be too," he said. "I can push through the pain to be out there with them. A little shrapnel isn't going to keep me from the mission."

Lemburg joined the U.S. Army last May, a decision that came as the result of a great deal of soul-searching.

"I was at a crossroads in my life, just tossing options around. This became one of the top options, and my recruiter sold me on it," he explained.

"I'm really glad I did it," he added. "It's changed my life for the better and definitely changed the way I look at a lot of things."

As for Iraq, Lemburg said he wouldn't try to glamorize it, but said it's not nearly as bad as he thought it would be.

"We have warm showers, beds and air conditioning," he said, then turning his attention to the insurgents' threatening the US-led attempt at establishing democracy for the Iraqi people. "And crazy people doing stupid things."

Lemburg is the son of Warren and Jan Lemburg, and brother of Mindi Goings and RanDee Littrel, all of Wauneta, and Branden Lemburg of Grand Island.

He attended grade school at Imperial until second grade when his family moved to Broken

Bow. He graduated from Broken Bow High School in 2002.