

# *A Brush with Death*

*by Frederick Wickert*

It has always been my belief that there is an appointed time to die for each of us. When the odds are that we are going to die, and then we don't, I believe it is because it is not yet our time to go.

The case of Army Private First Class Channing Moss is a good example. On March 16, 2006, his unit, the 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division had been in Afghanistan barely a month. Alpha Company platoon set out from Forward Base Tillman on their first patrol around 8:00 A.M. Moss was manning a Mark 19 machine gun in the turret of an up-armored Humvee, the last in a patrol of five U.S. vehicles and one pickup truck carrying nine Afghans.

After being on patrol for a quiet hour in remote terrain they were hit by an ambush, estimated to be only 700 meters from the Pakistan border. The attack came from a ridgeline on their right, where the attackers unleashed a large volume of RPG (rocket propelled grenades) and small arms fire. Moss was turning his machine gun turret to return fire when three RPG rounds hit the vehicle.

One Afghan died in the ambush. Moss, the Truck Commander, the Squad Leader and another Afghan were wounded in the attack. An RPG round smashed through the windshield of the Humvee, sliced the Truck Commander across the face and tore into Moss as he sat in the gunner's sling. It bore into his left hip, tore through his lower abdomen pulling some of his uniform fabric and a web belt with it. The tip of the RPG stopped short of breaking through the skin of his upper right thigh.

The truck Commander, with the end of his nose sliced off and his upper lip dangling loosely radioed the Squad leader and told him through a gurgle of blood, that Moss had a tail fin sticking out of his body.

The medic with the squad was Moss' best friend. He pulled Moss behind the passenger seat. Then he used every piece of gauze and bandage material he had. Luckily the web belt had kept the RPG from going all the way through. The medic wrapped gauze around the tailfin to stabilize it and to control the bleeding.

Moss lay bleeding on the dusty ground waiting for the helicopter to come and pick him up. Moss later recalled that he really didn't know what was inside of him. All he could hear was his sergeant telling him, "hold on, hold on." He didn't think that bird was ever going to get there.

There was a possibility the RPG could blow the chopper and all of them up with it, but the pilot and co-pilot never gave that a thought. All they were thinking about was that a young soldier was about to die and they had to get him some help.

Moss was nearly dead as the Black Hawk landed at the Battalion aid station, about twenty miles from the site of the ambush. The surgeon began cutting away the combat uniform and all the gauze bandages when he saw the tailfin of the RPG. He asked for volunteers to stay and help him try to save Moss' life. Several volunteered. The surgeon and his volunteers put on body armor and helmets. They called in a two-man team from an ordinance disposal unit.

The medical team decided to pull the device through in the direction it had traveled. First they had to cut off the tail fin. The surgeon remained calm as he sawed it off, but there were moments when everyone in the room were wide eyed, staring at each other.

Making the most delicate incision of his life, the surgeon cut the skin on the right thigh where the tip of the RPG had come to rest. Gently he eased the blood covered metal tube from Moss' body. The belt clung to the tube as the live round was eased out of the abdomen. Cradling it, he rushed it outside to a sandbag bunker.

A much-relieved team patched up Moss so he could be airlifted. Three months later, Moss attended the birth of his second daughter.

The soft-spoken native of Georgia remains presently at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C. where he will undergo one more abdominal surgery. He will be discharged from the Army on medical disability. He has lost 55 pounds, two thirds of his intestines and part of his pelvic bone. He also needs more repairs to his left hip.

Three times that fateful day, it was reasonable to expect Private Moss to die. He did not. Those in his vicinity such as the crew in the Humvee, the helicopter crew, and the medical team could all have been killed if the live round in Moss's body had gone off. Not one of them for a moment considered leaving him to die for their own safety. To a man, they all made saving him the top priority.

Why didn't Moss die that day? Why did not that RPG explode and kill a number of them that day? I say, it is because it isn't their time to die.