

July 12, 2008

## Portrait of courage

### Calgary soldier fighting to regain old life

By [PABLO FERNANDEZ](#), SUN MEDIA

For a Calgary soldier who lost both his legs in combat in Afghanistan, his time in war is over.

But the battle to put his life back together is just beginning.

Cpl. Mark Fuchko, a soldier with the King's Own Calgary Regiment (RCAC), was in Afghanistan less than a month when a bomb powerful enough to flatten a multi-storey building took out the armoured fighting vehicle (AFV) he was driving.



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The blast that would change his life forever came on March 29 of this year, and at the time felt only like a bump, said the young soldier recalling that day from his parents' home.

Premonitions plagued his mind even before he deployed on his second tour to Afghanistan, but as his crew was called upon to help a patrol vehicle that had gotten stuck in the mud he felt little apprehension.

He had just driven over that bit of mud and several of the AFVs in his unit had followed, all without incident.

But in an instant everything stopped. "It felt like I hit a bit of a bump ... I was going to get on the (intercom system) to tell my crew, 'Sorry guys,' when I saw that my episcopes were cracked and covered in blood, and the radio went dead," he said. "The first couple of seconds I remember getting a little panicky."

Mark, then 23 years old and the father of a 21-month-old boy, had worn tourniquets on both his thighs, fearing that if things went wrong, he would do everything in his power to keep himself from bleeding to death.

The pain from his fractured hip was intense, his legs weren't responding and the toxic gas that filled the inside of his driver's compartment made it almost impossible to breathe.

He did a quick assessment of his wounds and went into survival mode.

"I thought a little bit about my son ... I wanted to make sure I could see him again," he said.

His first goal was to stop the massive bleeding in his legs -- he did that by tightening the tourniquets until they stopped all blood flow.

The next goal was to get pulled out of his AFV.

Then it was waiting for the chopper that would take him to the Canadian base in the Kandahar Airfield (KAF), then getting to the hospital in KAF.

As he thought up small landmarks to work towards and met each small goal, his crew worked feverishly to free him from the driver's compartment and to keep him awake so that he would be conscious to fight for his life.

Wanting so badly to stay alert, Mark even limited the amount of pain killers he consumed while his mates tried to save him in the desert.

"I never wanted to take a lot of medication because I wanted to stay as conscious as possible ... I had to keep my wits about me. But once I got to KAF ... I just told them to put me out, I was in so much pain."

By the time doctors in Kandahar stabilized him, Mark had lost enough blood for a normal person to bleed out several times over.

He heard later his mates had lined up next to his bed, pumping their blood into his veins.

The blast shattered his pelvis, claimed one leg below the knee outright; it would eventually claim the second, also below the knee.

He next woke in Germany.

"The first few days, there was a lot of anger. I would recall that day and my heart beat would spike."

After a few weeks, Fuchko was flown back to Calgary and Foothills hospital. This week, he ran for the first time. When he entered his parents yesterday, he walked in on his own.

It was the first time his mom Helen had seen him walk without crutches.

Yesterday Helen hugged her son after watching him walk down the block. "It still hurts to watch him ... but I know it could've been much worse."

Mark is using the same survival techniques of meeting one goal at a time that he used in Afghanistan.

He hopes to pass the military's physical exam and continue to serve.

Despite everything, Mark said he'd go back to Afghanistan in a second. "Partly because I love the guys ... and also to get some payback.

"I just turned 24 and my feet didn't make it with me ... but I think I'm doing okay."