

TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2006

| CHAPTER THREE OF FOUR |

# War without end

FOR DOUBLE AMPUTEE SGT. BRENT BRETZ, THE MEDICAL COMPLICATIONS OF HIS INJURIES ARE ONLY PART OF THE CHALLENGE OF HEALING. THERE IS ALSO THE DIFFICULTY OF REDISCOVERING HUMOR AND PLAY, SELF-RELIANCE AND MANHOOD. PERHAPS MOST WRENCHING IS FIGURING OUT HOW TO PULL AWAY FROM THE PERSON WHO HAS BEEN AT HIS SIDE FROM THE BEGINNING — HIS MOTHER.



DEANNE FITZMAURICE / The Chronicle

Ten months after he lost both legs in Iraq, Sgt. Brent Bretz had traded in his electric wheelchair for a manual one and was venturing back into the life he led before shipping out. He and his 4-year-old daughter, Celeste, dressed as Tinker Bell, attend a Halloween block party in Tempe, Ariz., last fall.

## | THE SERIES |

**SUNDAY** Walter Reed Army Medical Center is where many of the war's most damaged soldiers start their agonizing recoveries.

**MONDAY** Being a hero in central Washington state is a thrill, but for Michael, the challenges of having a young family, no career and no legs can be overwhelming.

**TODAY** Brent finds that, in plunging back into the bar scene at home in Arizona, his relationship with his mother strains to the breaking point.

**WEDNESDAY** Perhaps the biggest milestone is joining fellow soldiers and remembering how, even without legs, to stand tall.

## STORY BY JOAN RYAN ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEANNE FITZMAURICE

SAN ANTONIO — Six months after his legs were blown off in Iraq, 23-year-old Army sniper Brent Bretz juggled the joystick on his electric wheelchair to coax it up the back ramp of the taxi van. It was a muggy June night in San Antonio. Kathy Pearce, Brent's 52-year-old mother, watched with the driver, relieved that for once they could venture from the Brooke Army Medical Center without having to find someone to lift her son from his chair into the passenger seat.

"This is something to think about, bud," Kathy said of the van and ramp.

"I am not owning a minivan," Brent said over his shoulder.

Kathy laughed. Brent had accepted with little complaint, and even some humor, the indignities that go with being confined to a hospital bed as doctors cut, stitched and patched his

burned and butchered body. And he was figuring out how, with no legs and a mangled left arm, to dress himself, use the toilet, take a shower, open the door to the two-room suite he shared with his mother at the Powless Guest House next to the hospital. He accepted that his new relationship with his body, like all new relationships, required compromise. But his 1999 Ford F-150 truck with the 13-inch lifts and tractor tires would not be one of them.

He talked about the truck the way other people talked about their homes. When he was in Iraq, he said he missed his truck more than anything except Celeste, his 4-year-old daughter from a brief marriage to his high school sweetheart. He had sunk \$8,000 into a new transmission, new rims, new tires and a new stereo system. Before he was de-



**PODCAST: REPORTER JOAN RYAN TALKS ABOUT THE STORY BEHIND THE SERIES.**

**PREVIOUS CHAPTERS: TO SEE EARLIER STORIES AND PHOTOS, GO TO [SFGATE.COM/WARWITHOUTEND/](http://SFGATE.COM/WARWITHOUTEND/).**

**SLIDESHOWS: DOZENS OF ADDITIONAL PHOTOS BY DEANNE FITZMAURICE AND MICHAEL MACOR ARE ONLINE.**

**VIDEO: STARTING WEDNESDAY, AN UPDATE ON HOW BRENT AND MICHAEL ARE DOING FROM VIDEOGRAPHER JAMES IRWIN.**

# San Francisco Chronicle

TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2006

## [ CHAPTER THREE ]

ployed with the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment in October 2004, he had driven the big black truck from Fort Lewis in Washington to his mother's house in Mesa, Ariz., for safekeeping.

"That truck is me," he often said.

Brent was his mother's wild child, the one who had pulled furthest away from her as he grew up. In his teens, he had rebelled against the strict rules of her Mormon faith that prohibited alcohol, smoking and even coffee. He fell in with a crowd that drank, smoked and stayed out late. Kathy worried that he was ruining his life. The more he pulled away from her, the tighter she held on until it seemed every conversation became a battle.

Now, with his body devastated, Brent and his mother had fallen back into roles they had long ago left behind. He depended on Kathy. She rarely left his side, managing every detail of his life, a gift Brent appreciated but one that also made him want to scream sometimes.

He regained his first measure of freedom in May when he became an outpatient, nearly six months after being wounded. By then, he had transferred from the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio to be closer to his family in Arizona. He regained his second measure of freedom when he got an electric wheelchair. He no longer needed his mother to push him like a baby in a stroller.

■ ■ ■

On this hot June night, he and his mother were going to dinner at Cracker Barrel. He had gelled his hair into tiny peaks, like upside-down goatees, a style his and his sniper pals had adopted in Iraq. So when he rolled into the restaurant, with his spiky hair and his sunken eyes and missing legs, he made quite an entrance. Diners strained not to look.

"If I'da known you provided chairs," he cracked to the waitress, "I wouldn't'a brought my own." The young woman opened her mouth to reply but seemed flummoxed and hurried away.

He was in a playful mood, in part because he was the subject of a dishy rumor that he had married Amy, one of the numerous young women he had dated while stationed at Fort Lewis. The cell phone in his lap beeped. It had not stopped since early afternoon, when the first text message arrived from a friend asking if the rumor were true. Brent held up the phone to read the latest missive. He broke into a crooked smile. It

was from Amy herself.

"I think I'd remember my own wedding!" he said, reading the message out loud.

Brent lapped out a response: "Where should we go on our honeymoon?"

He had been back in the United States since January, two weeks after the supply truck he was driving near Mosul hit an improvised explosive device, the signature weapon of Iraqi insurgents. Brent suffered severe head trauma, a ruptured spleen, a blown-out left elbow, collapsed lungs, fractured face bones, nerve damage that left him deaf in one ear, second-degree burns on half his body, and the loss of both legs. Doctors were not sure he would live. But they stabilized him at hospitals in Germany then transported him to Bethesda. Normally, he would have been sent to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, but November and December had been bloody months, with 1,927 wounded in eight weeks, and every bed in the intensive care unit at Walter Reed was filled.

Brent survived the blast and the trip to the United States only to discover that he had not left the war behind. He simply was fighting a new one — against his own body. Its fiercest weapon was called heterotopic ossification, or HO.

Instead of forming scar tissue around his wounds, Brent's body was forming bone. It grew like coral in both legs and in his damaged left arm, preventing Brent from using prosthetic legs and keeping him on a steady dose of painkillers. The HO had left the ends of his stumps looking like two small sacks stuffed with walnuts. The rogue bone growth had dislocated his elbow and torn a tendon in his arm. It had pushed one of the three metal plates in the arm up through the skin. Doctors had to haul Brent back into surgery to open up the arm again and remove the plate. HO can continue growing for more than a year, so doctors told Brent and his mother that they couldn't remove the bone until the growth stopped.

Brent's body was rebelling in other ways, too. He had pressure sores from his arm brace and pain from skin grafts on his thighs. He had infections. He had ringing and pepping sounds in his blown-out left ear and white spots dancing in front of his left eye. "He has so much healing to do, his body doesn't know where to start first," Kathy told friends back home.

Brent also faced a second battle that was only beginning to become clear. As he felt more like himself again, he chafed at his dependence on his mother.

It was a jarring contrast to his life as a sniper and team leader within his platoon: slipping up hills and behind buildings to close in on the enemy, adapting his camouflage to the terrain, firing his shots, slipping away again. He saw how completely his mother had merged her life with his, leaving her job as a bookkeeper in a law office to care for him around the clock. He loved her and teased her, and he knew she tried to preserve whatever independence he had, often answering questions about him with, "That's something for Brent to decide."

But he also believed he would be more independent by now if she were not around to plug in his wheelchair at night, change the dressings on his skin grafts and refill the compartments of his weekly pill holders. "Sometimes," he confided to his siblings, "it's way too much."

In the restaurant, Kathy leaned over to cut Brent's chicken-fried steak.

"This is driving me crazy," he said, looking down at his wheelchair. He had been reminiscing about boyhood summers when he jumped from cliffs around Saguaro Lake in Arizona. Now he couldn't even get into a car by himself. "I sit there and think, this just sucks, that I can't just jump up and get in my truck and go. This sucks. This definitely sucks. If I had my legs, I'd be gone."

He set down his fork, having made barely a dent in his dinner.

What he grieved for most, he said, was the job he left behind in Iraq. Maybe that sounded dumb to people who haven't served in the military, he said. They can't understand the bond among men who come to feel like brothers, or the exhilaration of executing your part of an operation, especially one that demands the skills of a sniper. He had spent hours at the shooting range in Fort Lewis, always striving to hit 40 of 40 targets. He never wanted to be what he called "an everyday infantryman." During his training, as his group of snipers played intense games of "capture the flag," the flag was taken just once, and Brent had done it. He had crawled all the way, slipping past three guards.

"It was the one thing that I loved to do," he said.

■ ■ ■

When Kathy arrived with Brent in the physical therapy room at Brooke the next morning, she noticed a middle-aged woman near the exercise tables sitting ramrod straight, a smile so frozen on her face that she looked to be wearing a mask. Kathy figured she was a mother who was new to this, still getting accustomed to the puckered skin and oozing wounds, the smell of dying flesh and antibiotic cream, the lurching gait of men balanced on spindly artificial legs. Kathy had been like her once, horrified and grief-stricken but putting up a good front.

Now, she moved through the hospital and PT room as if she worked there, which in a way she did. She was consid-

# San Francisco Chronicle

TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2006

## [ CHAPTER THREE ]

ered by some to be overprotective and by others to be a saint. She always seemed chipper, and had become such a respected advocate for Brent that the Department of Defense contacted her about working for a new program called Military Severely Injured. She would help wounded soldiers and their families in Arizona transition into civilian life, advocating for them with the military, hospitals and the Department of Veterans Affairs. She was scheduled to fly to Washington, D.C., later in the month for a job interview.

Kathy found a chair by the wright machines and was chatting with a physical therapist as Brent did leg lifts atop a padded table. When he finished his workout an hour later, Kathy was telling one of his doctors that no one had changed the dressing on Brent's thigh graft so she had done it herself. She was told to find a nurse next time. Brent paid no attention. He sat in his chair, clicking the joystick left and then right, spinning in circles. Kathy smiled when she noticed the spinning. It was so Brent.

But she worried, too, about the restlessness. They were going home in a few

days. She couldn't wait to sleep in her own bed again and to be with her family. But she knew she couldn't protect Brent in Arizona the way she had during their six months at the hospitals. He was still frail and vulnerable to infections. His friends might not be careful enough with him. They might not know that he came within a whisper of dying. She worried that Brent might do something stupid just to prove he was still the same guy. She worried that he would care more about being accepted by his friends than about keeping himself healthy. She wanted him to be independent, but she wanted even more for him to be safe.

For Kathy, leaving Brooke meant leaving the orderly, controlled world where her son's broken body had been healing. She felt, in going home with Brent, as if she were pushing open an unfamiliar door, and she was bracing for what waited on the other side.

■ ■ ■

The plane from San Antonio landed at the Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix on a bright morning in July.

Kathy, emerging from the gate at Brent's side, wiped away tears when she saw her children, grandchildren and the two dozen cousins, aunts, uncles and friends holding handmade "Welcome Home" signs and red-white-and-blue balloons. Brent's 4-year-old daughter Celeste broke from the crowd and threw her arms around Brent's neck.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

"I'm slow," he said.

"Daddy," Celeste said, surveying the cheering crowd, "everybody loves you."

Brent looped his arm around his daughter but couldn't pull her up. Brent's sister Melany Merkley walked over and lifted the little girl onto his lap.

Later, guests streamed in and out of Kathy's house, eating Mexican food, platters of vegetables and other treats Brent's brother and sisters had prepared for the homecoming party. Brent slept through much of it, exhausted from the trip. Late in the afternoon, he rolled into the kitchen to find his mother and sisters leaning against the counters, talking and laughing.

"Um, I don't mean to bring this up in mixed company," Brent said, "but I

need to take a shower tonight."

"There's a hose outside," Melany cracked.

"Somebody's gonna have to carry my, uh, butt in there," he said.

He couldn't wheel himself close enough to the shower to transfer onto the chair in the stall. The three sisters looked at each other and, as one, shouted, "Russell!"

Russell Britz, Brent's only brother, had lifted Brent into and out of the car from the airport, and now carried him into the shower. Afterward, as Brent dressed in his room, the cloth draped over the nightstand became tangled in one of his wheels. He couldn't move. He yelled and whistled for five minutes.

Finally, he called his mother's home number from his cell phone. His sister Shilo Sessions answered in the kitchen, just yards from Brent's room. Brent, making a joke of his helplessness, disguised his voice, saying he was someone named Pedro who needed a hand with something. Shilo untangled him.

That night, his first at home, Brent was determined to let loose. He wanted



Brent suffers from a particularly virulent case of heterotopic ossification, the rogue bone growth that plagues many amputees. His HO has caused setbacks in his physical therapy, preventing him from being fitted for permanent prostheses for more than a year. But he has kept his eye on his goal — walking.

# San Francisco Chronicle

TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2006

## [ CHAPTER THREE ]

to knock back some Rolling Rocks and Jäger Bombs, a mixture of Jägermeister liqueur and Red Bull energy drink that had been his favorite cocktail in the bus around Fort Lewis. He had put on jeans, a black T-shirt and sunglasses. "Anybody know where I put my shoes?" he joked.

Kathy, standing in the doorway, smiled and shook her head. "OK, make sure this house is cleaned up by the time I get back," he teased. She bopped him on the head with one of her grandchildren's stuffed animals.

At the end of the driveway waited Brent's enormous, shiny, jacked-up black Ford F-150, a "Bush-Cheney '04" sticker on the back window. He rolled himself to the truck.

"Let's go!" Brent called to Russell, who was trying to figure out how to lift Brent into the eye-high passenger seat. Russell bent his knees, gathered his brother in his arms and hoisted him as if placing a heavy parcel on a high shelf. Melany, another sister, Marie Ekren, and Russell's wife, Rohndia, climbed into the backseat.

"I miss this thing. I'm telling ya," Brent said, cranking the stereo. It didn't seem to matter he was relegated to the passenger seat of his own truck. He seemed happy just to be inside it again, as if it were a portal back to his old life.

At the Stray Cat lounge in Tempe, Brent could barely see over the bar from his chair. He ordered a Rolling Rock, drained it and ordered another. He tucked the bottle between his legs and shot pool with Russell, propelling himself by pulling on the edges of the table with his right hand. His damaged left arm and hand served as a passable prop for his cue stick.

"Man, this is hard" Brent said, laughing when he missed a ball completely. His face had opened. The person trapped inside the mangled muscles and bones seemed to be wriggling to the surface. It was as if he were breathing for the first time in months. He propelled himself toward the bar and banged into the barstool between Marie and Rohndia. He was showing them photos from Fort Lewis that he had saved on his cell phone — half-dressed girls sprawled on his bed, a pyramid of Rolling Rock bottles in his apartment. He ordered a Jäger Bomb and drank it in one gulp. The smell of the bar and taste of the booze made him feel like himself again. He ordered another Jäger Bomb.

Melany, as devout a Mormon as her mother, watched silently and wide-eyed, sipping her Sprite.

■ ■ ■

At 7:30 the next morning, the phone woke Kathy. It was Brent calling from the next room. Could she bring him water and an aspirin? Brent insisted his headache wasn't a hangover, but Kathy knew better. She worried about him drinking while on heavy meds that weren't supposed to be mixed with alcohol. She hoped the previous night was a

one-time thing, a release from all those months cooped up at the hospital.

When Brent rolled into the kitchen, pale and squinty-eyed, Kathy opened a prescription bottle and handed him his morning dose of Dilaudid, a painkilling derivative of morphine.

"Hit me again," Brent said, his hand opened for a second pill.

"It says one."

"Hit me again."

"Do you want juice or Gatorade?" Kathy said, ignoring his request. She hated these battles. She wanted more than anything to keep him free of pain, but she also knew some of his meds, such as Dilaudid, could be addictive. How was she supposed to find the line between too few meds and too many?

Brent picked up the walkie-talkie Kathy had given him after the incident with the nightstand table: loth.

"Gatorade," he said into the walkie-talkie, his voice booming through the monitor on the kitchen counter. "And. One. More."

Kathy poured him a glass of Gatorade.

"Have something to eat," she said. She put the medicine in a cabinet, out of his reach.

■ ■ ■

A few days after Brent's homecoming, his cousin Jason Jones picked him up for a day of cruising. Jason was 24 and an electrician who worked for himself. He was Brent's favorite cousin, but Kathy would have preferred Brent hang out with someone more settled. Jason was as wild as Brent. She worried that neither of them had the sense to know when they were putting Brent in danger.

"You going in the truck?" Kathy asked. The truck seemed to embody what Kathy feared about the man Brent had been before his injury, and the one, he might become again. It represented a kind of freedom that made her stomach tighten. She watched Jason drive away with her son, offering up a prayer to keep them safe.

Brent and Jason picked up a friend and drove to the Kona Grill at the Fashion Square mall in Scottsdale. But something was wrong with the truck. As they pulled up to the restaurant, they saw a

thin trail of dark fluid bleeding from the chassis. When Jason shut off the engine, the fluid gushed out, a wet black puddle spreading over the pavement.

"Transmission," Jason said after peering under the truck. He had lifted Brent down into his chair on the sidewalk. Brent looked as if he might be sick. They watched for the tow truck from an outside table at the Kona Grill. Brent was working on his second Long Island iced tea when it arrived. The F-150 was too big for the driver's truck. Forty minutes later, the second tow truck driver shook his head, too. Brent would need a flatbed, which would take hours.

"S— happens, I guess," Brent said.

One day home and his strong, beautiful truck was as broken as he was.

■ ■ ■

Brent spent the next month going out with Jason almost every night, drinking the way he always had. He didn't get home until 2 in the morning, sometimes 3. Kathy stayed awake until she heard him roll through the door. She didn't trust Jason to watch out for Brent. She felt sick every time she thought about him mixing medication like Dilaudid with alcohol. She feared he might drink himself into a coma or worse. Their conversations became more confrontational.

"I've never abused my drugs," he told her, "and your name's not on the (prescription) bottle."

The clashes reprised Brent's teenage years, as if he were making the transition into manhood all over again. Kathy even tried giving him a curfew. He laughed. A curfew? He was 23. He had been to war.

Kathy recently had flown back to D.C. and accepted the job with the Military Severely Injured program. She was scheduled to start in September. She would be helping other wounded soldiers and their families, yet here she was in anguish herself. She had called on everything she knew as a mother to save him from his wounds. But she didn't know how to save him from himself.

On a Monday morning in August, Kathy reached the breaking point. Brent had been out late again drinking with Jason. She stood in the doorway of his room.

"You're going to have to find another

# San Francisco Chronicle

TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2006

## [ CHAPTER THREE ]

place to live," she said. "I'm not going to stand around and watch you do to yourself what the frags couldn't."

■ ■ ■

Brent left a few weeks later, in early September.

He and Jason moved into a ground-level, two-bedroom condo in Tempe. On Brent's first night, an abscess on his leg began to bleed. The bony growths on his stumps had pushed internal stitches up against his skin, creating a hole in his leg the size and depth of his thumb. Blood soaked through the pads of gauze almost as quickly as Brent could pack them into the hole.

He panicked.

"We need to go to my mom's house so she can do it for me," Brent said. He knew a wound like this could become infected. His mother would know how to make sure it healed properly.

Jason told him to wait. The bleeding would stop. Go rest, Jason said. He didn't want to see Brent running back to his mother at the first setback. Brent took his Dilaudid and slept. When he

awoke, the bleeding had stopped.

Jason was trying to be both Brent's caretaker and playmate. In their condo, he had re-hung Brent's bathroom door so it swung outward, into the hall, freeing up enough space inside for Brent's chair. He had installed a handheld nozzle in the shower. He had tied shoelaces to the on-off chains of the bedroom ceiling fan so Brent could reach them. He shouldered the household chores, though Brent tried vacuuming by maneuvering his chair around the living room, accomplishing little more than making Jason laugh. Jason still had to lift Brent in and out of cars. Brent never failed to thank him.

"Shut the hell up," Jason told Brent one day. "You'd do the same for me. I don't want to hear 'thank you' every two seconds."

Sometimes Brent would have to shoo him away, as he did with his mother. "Dude, I got it," Brent would say when Jason leapt to push him over a crease in the rug or to fetch water for his pills. Brent had learned to make do when Jason was at work, even figuring out how

to pull himself onto the kitchen counter to get food and utensils from the upper cabinets.

One night, after they had come home from a bar, Jason heard a thump then Brent yelling for him. He raced down the hall to find Brent sitting on the floor in the hallway. When Brent had gone to sleep, he had left his chair at the end of the bed instead of the side, where it usually was. In the middle of the night when he had to go to the bathroom, he had launched himself from the bed into his chair — except the chair wasn't there. He had crashed to the floor and rolled into the hallway.

Jason burst out laughing when he saw Brent rolling on the floor, unable to right himself. He hurried toward Brent, who was relieved to get help, but Jason went past him and into the living room.

"I'm getting the camera," Jason said. "You are *not* taking a picture!"

"Yeah, I am, dude," he said, still laughing. "What are you going to do about it?"

At night, when he and Jason cruised the bars, Brent seemed as confident as

ever in his ability to attract women. He chatted them up as he always had, tucking their phone numbers into his back pocket and setting up dates.

"Chicks dig scars," he joked to his friends. "Nothing's changed except now girls open doors for me."

He laughed when told that some double amputees worried that their wives and girlfriends wouldn't love them anymore. "How could you *not* love me?" he said.

His only concern was sex. He knew all his parts worked. He just wasn't sure about the physics — the angles and such. The first time he brought a date back to the condo, he managed to work it all out. "I adapted," he said. "No problem."

■ ■ ■

In mid-October, Brent flew up to Washington state. The soldiers in his battalion, the 1-5, had returned from their year in Iraq, and there would be a ball in their honor at the Tacoma convention center. Brent had not seen any of his closest Army buddies since the December day his legs were blown off.

He knew that Sgt. Michael Buyas, the other double amputee from Charlie Company, was flying in for the ball, too.

Brent and Michael had spent the last 10 months trying to heal their broken bodies and figure out whom they might become. Now, as they headed for the 1-5's homecoming ball, they wondered what pieces they still carried of the soldiers they had been. Would their buddies see past the lost limbs and recognize what was still strong and resilient in them? For Brent and Michael, the ball would be their final time with the 1-5. Later, when they thought about whether the night marked the end of something or the beginning, they knew that it was both.

**Wednesday:** Brent and Michael reunite with their battalion.

*E-mail Joan Ryan at joanryan@sfrchronicle.com, Deanne Fitzmaurice at dfitzmaurice@sfrchronicle.com and Michael Macor at mmacor@sfrchronicle.com.*