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## The Incredible Saga of Sgt. Maj. Brad Kasal

### By Nathaniel R. Helms

This Marine survived Fallujah's "House of Hell" for more than one reason. Today, he serves as a source of inspiration for all who struggle against the physical and psychological wounds of war.

Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Brad Kasal hates the word hero, especially when it is applied to him. The 41-year-old Navy Cross recipient and iconoclastic Marine who was literally shot to pieces in Fallujah, Iraq, while saving others believes that is what Marines should do.

"Other people use the word hero and make things sound bigger than they are," Kasal says. "The Marine Corps is about camaraderie and taking care of each other. That is what Marines are supposed to do."

Kasal is far more proud of "his" Marines, as he is prone to call the young privates and corporals who answered their nation's call. They served with distinction in some of the fiercest combat Americans have faced since the Vietnam War some 35 years ago.

For more than 21 years, the tireless infantryman has trained, counseled and mentored young Marines. In return, they give him nicknames like Robo-Grunt and Rock Jaw and speak about him in tones of awe.

In their dangerous world, Kasal is far more than an ordinary Marine—he is a legend they will follow into hell. In Iraq, many of them did.

Staff Sgt. Sam Mortimer fought with Kasal in bloody al Anbar province for six months. Today, he is a drill instructor at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego.

"Kasal is always ready," Mortimer says. "There ain't another Marine like him in the entire Corps."

### Shot Seven Times

Kasal was ready on Nov. 13, 2004, when 3rd Bn., 1st Marines, 1st Marine Div., known throughout the Corps as "The Thundering Third," entered its sixth day of house-to-house combat in Fallujah.

As 1st sergeant of Weapons Company, Kasal led 170 Marines supporting the battalion with Humvee-mounted Browning M-2 .50-cal. machine guns, TOW and Javelin anti-armor rockets, MK-19 automatic grenade launchers and 81mm mortars.

Kasal was in the field as usual, providing flank security for a weapons section Humvee covering 3rd Plt., K Co. Kilo is a rock-hard infantry company Kasal ramrodded on its first deployment to Iraq the preceding year.

Among the men he was supporting were Lance Cpl. Alex Nicoll, walking point, and Cpl. R.J. Mitchell, a squad leader in 3rd Platoon. Both men were "his" Marines, Kasal explained.

Late in the morning another squad from 3rd Platoon encountered a house full of dangerous foreign fighters armed with a variety of weapons and deadly cunning.

They waited until Sgt. Christopher Pruitt led the squad into the house before springing a vicious ambush that immediately left Pruitt and two other men wounded. Several other squad members were trapped inside.

Mitchell's squad and Kasal's weapons section responded from down the street. Inside the house a close quarter's battle ensued. The fight left Sgt. Byron Norwood dead and 10 men wounded.

Kasal was shot seven times and hit with 43 pieces of shrapnel when he used his body to shield Nicoll from an insurgent's grenade. Kasal's left leg was nearly severed below the knee by three AK-47 bullets. He eventually lost 60% of his blood, doctors later determined.

Lance Cpl. Nicoll lost his lower left leg in the same burst of automatic weapons fire that struck Kasal. Sgt. Mitchell, Nicoll's best friend and squad leader, was shot three times and struck by eight pieces of the same grenade shrapnel while coming to their aid through a fire-swept room. For his action, Mitchell also was awarded the Navy Cross.

### Fighting Amputation

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Paul J. Girard, the orthopedic surgeon who treated Kasal at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego, said the doctors in Iraq were satisfied the grievously wounded Marine should not immediately lose his mangled leg. For the moment they focused on saving it.

"Up to that point, I thought I was going to lose my leg for sure," Kasal recalls.

A few days later Kasal was evacuated to the National Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Md. When he arrived, the doctors urged him to let them amputate his leg. Kasal refused. Against their better judgment the doctors demurred, Kasal says.

Kasal was a patient at Bethesda from Nov. 18, 2004 to Jan. 22, 2005. During that time he received more than a dozen surgeries to flush out his leg wound and place a diabolical looking contraption called an Illazarov Frame to begin the healing process.

From Nov. 18 until just before Christmas, Kasal was pretty much out of it, he said. He was enduring surgery to clean out his wounds every other day while on constant pain medications.

"The fact that he had a large soft tissue wound made the procedure more complicated," Girard says. "It speaks a lot to his strength of character. He was able to see far enough down the street and be able to see it ultimately helping him."

In January 2005, Kasal was sent back to his home base at Camp Pendleton, Calif., for treatment and recovery under Dr. Girard's care. After a brief stay in the hospital he went home. For the next 11 months, Kasal relied on friends and volunteers in almost all aspects of his life, Kasal says.

### Seeking Help

Today, Kasal is the sergeant major of Recruiting Station Des Moines, covering a five-state area from his headquarters in Iowa. Remarkably, Kasal recently passed the Marine Corps physical fitness test and has returned to full duty.

"I am not yet back to what I used to be, but it is better now," Kasal says. "I am going for 100%, that is my goal. Will I get there

realistically? Who knows.

"What I tell young Marines or soldiers or anyone else in this situation is, No. 1, do not be afraid to ask for help. And two, don't be afraid to talk about what they are thinking and doing, because depression is going to set in no matter how strong you are. It happens to everyone at some point. It may be for 10 minutes or it may be for 10 days, or it may be the whole process. But everybody is going to get some depression for some time. Don't think you are abnormal for that, so make sure you talk to somebody.

"And three, listen to what the doctors tell you, but it is all on you also. You are going to succeed or fail based on your own will power. How bad you want it is going to dictate how much you get back. Whether you will ever be back to 100%, who knows, but how good you want to get depends on you."

Nathaniel R. Helms, an Army Vietnam vet who did three tours from 1968-1970, is the author of *My Men Are My Heroes: The Brad Kasal Story* (Meredith Books, 2006).