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Dusty Hill's story of survival becoming inspiration for others

By DAVE CLARKE Regional Coordinator

When one of the mothers gave me a list of Annawan's "Hometown Heroes," 11 guys who had attended Annawan High School and had just arrived in Iraq with the Galva National Guard unit last March, one stood out -- SPC Dustin Hill.

Anyone with a name like that -- Dusty Hill -- is bound to be famous someday I said to myself.

I didn't know how right I was for the wrong reasons.

Hill has unfortunately become the best-known member of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, after suffering extensive injuries in a suicide car bomb attack Sept. 21, 2004, in Baghdad.

He was one of the first patients in the new amputee center at Brook Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio, Texas, where he is still recovering. His positive attitude and forward outlook have attracted the attention of national news media covering treatment of soldiers wounded in combat. Now promoted to sergeant, Hill has been featured on CNN as well as several major newspapers and magazines. The latest will be a series which begins Sunday on WQAD-TV, NewsChannel 8, by staff reporter Vanessa Van Hyfte who also hails from Hill's hometown of Annawan. Van Hyfte and WQAD's chief photographer Andy McKay recently flew to San Antonio and spent time with Hill and his mother, Liz Kelm of Wyanet, who is also a nurse and has been staying in San Antonio to help with her son's recovery. Van Hyfte, who is weekend anchor at WQAD, said the series, entitled "Dusty's Miracle -- A Soldier's Story,"

will begin airing Sunday during the 10 p.m. newscast and continue nightly throughout the week. A one-hour special on Hill, who had worked at Great Dane/Pines Trailer in Kewanee before being deployed, is tentatively planned for Memorial Day on the Moline station.

Foxtrot Battery had been in Baghdad six months, mostly patrolling the dangerous six-lane highway leading from the airport to the relatively secure Green Zone, when at 3:35 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 21, SPC Hill's life changed forever.

According to unit commander Major Mike Kessel, a patrol had stopped civilian traffic while checking an abandoned vehicle. A military convoy was passing and a car pulled in behind them and alongside their humvee and blew up. Four other members of the unit, including SPC Lucas Siemers of Galva, who were outside the vehicle at the time, received less serious injuries and were later returned to duty. Hill, who was the gunner and had remained atop the humvee, was not as fortunate. He was evacuated from the scene by helicopter to the combat hospital in Baghdad, then to Germany, and eventually to Brook Army Medical Center in Texas, considered one of the best burn centers in the world.

Hill suffered second, third and fourth degree burns over 33 percent of his body and extensive injuries to his hands and face.

Correspondent Beth Nissen, who interviewed Hill at BAMC for the CNN story which aired Jan. 26, said "No one here is more determined to make it than Spec. Dusty Hill. His life changed in a blast of flame and metal Sept. 21 in Baghdad. He was badly burned on the head, face, neck and arms, lost his right eye and both his hands."

Eventually, his right hand and three inches of his right arm, the fingers and thumb of his left hand were amputated. "I can't reach out for nothing," Hill told CNN. "I can't grab nothing. It drives me up the wall."

He also lost his right eye, and most of an ear and his nose. Nissen said. "He tries not to think about the way things used to be, the way he used to be."

The road to recovery got off to a bumpy start. In an e-mail sent Dec. 16, his mother said "Dusty stood up for the first time after his gall bladder surgery -- 30 seconds the first time and then for a minute the second time. He has a lot of pain from the incision when he stands which will lessen with time."

After three months in the Surgical Research Burn Center at BAMC, SGT Hill is now in the new amputee care center where he was able to stand, with the help of an aide, as a general pinned the Purple Heart on his chest on Jan. 14.

In March, his mother told the Bureau County Republican, "Dusty has given up his wheelchair! It now sits in his room collecting dust and whatever else may land on it."

According to an article on Hill in the April issue of the Army National Guard's "GX-The Guard Experience," the artilleryman from Illinois has started walking independently. "He is looking forward to receiving a myoelectric robotic prosthesis for his right hand and is scheduled to receive a new artificial right eye which will supposedly match his left one perfectly," the story said. According to the BCR interview, he will continue with plastic surgery and is considering amputation of his left hand because prosthesis on both sides would be more functional.

Everyone who has met Hill in recent months, from TV reporter Van Hyfte to Maj. Kessel, who paid him a visit as soon as the unit arrived back in the states, has commented about Hill's optimism, even after what he's been through.

That doesn't surprise his former Annawan High School principal, Linda Rakestraw. "Dusty always had a great attitude and was never a problem in high school. He had a solid group of close-knit friends, including several who went with him to Iraq. I think that bond of togetherness is partly what helped them all come back alive," Rakestraw said.

Mrs. Rakestraw said Dusty was "upbeat" when she saw him briefly on Easter during a short trip home, his first since the 120 men of Battery F left for training at Fort Hood on Nov. 2, 2003.

His goal now, according to the article in the National Guard magazine, is to be able to go fishing before next winter -- a simple wish for most of us, but for Dusty Hill, it's one of the "miracles" he's found in something we all too often take for granted called life.

He will also hopefully be able to return for Foxtrot's official welcome home ceremony scheduled for Saturday, July 9, in Galva.

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