

BATTLE TESTED

Baptist Health enlists in fight to help a wounded warrior

By Kitty Dumas

Anthony Ameen, a former combat medic and Purple Heart recipient, was grappling with the future.

At a routine appointment to adjust his prosthetic leg, he learned he would eventually lose his other leg unless he received expensive, complex surgeries to treat a chronically infected open wound.

“I was upset,” Mr. Ameen remembered. “I didn’t want to hear that kind of news.”

The prognosis was one more challenge among the many Mr. Ameen faced to rebuild his life after being wounded in Afghanistan during a firefight with the Taliban. The U.S. Navy hospital corpsman was running to aid a grievously wounded Marine when he stepped on an IED, an improvised explosive device. He knew immediately his left foot was lost. As he grasped his fingers, which were almost severed, he was shocked at the excruciating pain in his other leg, his right leg.

His injuries were catastrophic. His left leg was amputated below the knee. Doctors managed to reconstruct his left hand, but his right leg was severely burned, and his tibia, or shinbone, was shattered in the explosion. Despite more than 30 surgeries over the next nine years, his right leg wouldn’t heal. Chronic infections had created a deep, seeping hole. Veterans Administration hospitals recommended more surgery for Mr. Ameen, who lives in Phoenix, but could not provide the sophisticated medical resources he needed.

As he headed home from his prosthetic appointment last spring, Mr. Ameen tried to face that the battle to save his remaining leg might be lost. And then, a surprise.

“It’s amazing how God works,” he said, “because on the way home I got a call.”

The call came from Carol Novak, CEO of South Florida-based Restoring Heroes Foundation, created to provide veterans and first responders with advanced surgeries for complex traumatic injuries. The organization was teaming up with Baptist Health, and Mr. Ameen would be their first patient.

The partnership was spearheaded in part by Jill Waibel, M.D., chief of dermatology at Baptist Hospital. “We always say that freedom is not free,” said Dr. Waibel, who volunteers on the medical team of Restoring Heroes. “Helping wounded warriors return to as normal a life as possible is very important.”

To treat Mr. Ameen, a team of traumatic injury specialists was assembled, led by Charles Jordan, M.D., orthopedic trauma surgeon. The team included Jaime Flores, M.D., Joel Levin, M.D., and Joshua Lampert, M.D., specialists in microvascular reconstructive surgery and plastic surgery, as well as Dr. Waibel. Their treatment strategy included a multistage surgery that required careful coordination.

First, Dr. Jordan removed all infected or dead soft tissues and bone. He cleaned out the inside of the tibial canal, then inserted a concrete antibiotic rod designed to release medicine over time. The antibiotics would treat the wound from the inside to halt the infection, allowing soft tissues and bone to heal.

Then Drs. Flores, Levin and Lampert began a second procedure to close the wound by transplanting a flap of Mr. Ameen’s own skin. “We took tissue from the outside of the thigh and used microsurgery to put it over that shin to deliver the blood supply so it would heal,” Dr. Lampert explained. The team worked with specialists at Miami Cardiac & Vascular Institute, using the innovative technology of angiography road-mapping to assess the position of



Anthony Ameen with his wife, Stephanie, and their children.

blood vessels and determine exactly where the tissue should be attached. After six weeks, Dr. Jordan removed the antibiotic rod, allowing the healing to continue.

“It was crucial for Mr. Ameen to be cared for in a place with the resources to create a successful outcome,” said Wayne Brackin, Baptist Health’s executive vice president and chief operating officer.

“We have world-class specialists who worked together to plan and coordinate every stage of his care,” added Karl Cetta, an assistant vice president at Homestead Hospital who coordinates the program for Baptist Health.

After everything he has been through, Mr. Ameen can hardly believe his dramatic recovery. “I’m doing quite well. I’m about as good as it can get,” said Mr. Ameen, who is back home in Phoenix with his wife and four children. “I’m no longer on antibiotics or any pain meds.”

His wife, Stephanie, envisions a future of Daddy-time, with her husband playing with the kids in ways that would have been impossible without the surgery.

Mr. Ameen also has visions for the future. Injured trying to help a fallen soldier, he continues that mission through Wings for Warriors, a nonprofit organization he established to assist other wounded veterans (see WingsForWarriors.org). In his heart, he feels he carries the spirit of the Marine he wasn’t able to save.

“I’m living for him and the others who didn’t come home,” said Mr. Ameen, whose unit lost 21 members. He embraces that responsibility through service to others who need the kind of help he has received. And he’s looking forward to hearing about the next veteran helped by Baptist Health. “There’s a lot of veterans like myself.” ■

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For more information about Restoring Heroes, visit RestoringHeroes.org.