

REHABILITATION

Memoirs of Major Donald Babb

(5 October 1968 to 19 March 1969 - 28 April 1969 to 31 January 1970)

Fitzsimons General Hospital was a busy place, too busy at times. Almost daily there were new arrivals coming in from Vietnam via Japan and then Travis and on to Denver. For the time being I stayed in the room where I was taken on arrival. A private room with a bed, bedside table, a chair and there was a wall locker near the door to the hallway. This was the Orthopedic Ward, 5 East, and I was in Room 10.

Actually the Orthopedic Ward took up the entire 5th floor. Those patients on Ward 5 West were the ambulatory cases as well as those patients recovering from surgery. The hospital itself was a huge building. Entering the front from the parking area, one goes through a lobby of sorts and proceeds on to the elevators. Almost all of my time was spent on Ward 5 East or in the Physical Therapy area on the first floor. On several occasions I had the opportunity to visit the office areas on the second or third floor. Leaving the main hospital building to the rear or north there was a narrow road running east-west along the building. Across the road north was a much smaller building that housed the Orthotic Lab where the lab staff fabricated a variety of braces for patients. All artificial limbs, however, were procured through commercial facilities in Denver. To the west of the main building was the BOQ. There were other buildings scattered around or adjacent to the main building, the Finance Office was one of them. A block or two away was a gymnasium and an indoor swimming pool.

Mom, Dad and my sister drove from Independence, Missouri to Denver, Colorado the first weekend after I got to Fitzsimons. Mom and Dad came right into my room, my sister sort of lingered by the doorway. There were hugs and kisses and handshakes and sighs and tears. It sure was great to see them. When my sister left the room, Mom got up and followed her. Left alone, Dad and I chatted a bit, then Dad said to me, "I've seen slaughtered hogs that look better than you." I wasn't much of a host and found myself getting tired very quickly and taking a nap. All part of the healing process, physically and mentally.

During my waking hours I shared with them the plan my doctor had outlined for me. Physical therapy, physical therapy and more physical therapy every morning every day. I told them I was satisfied with all the treatment I had received from the date I was wounded right up to the present time. I thought everything was going pretty well all things considered. My Mom and sister, however, had other ideas. They were not impressed with my room even though I had said I had everything I needed, my bed was changed daily, the food was good, etc. What they saw was very different. In their opinion the room was filthy. There was lint, hair, crumbs, egg shells, and live bugs on the floor. The furniture was dirty and dusty and one afternoon as I took another nap, Mom watched as a mouse played around the wastebasket just under the head of the bed. Mom was so disturbed at these conditions that she purchased articles to clean the furniture and floor in my room. After returning to Independence, both Mom and my sister wrote letters to Senator Stuart Symington and to Congressman William Randall, about the uncleanness

of my room at Fitzsimons. There were letters sent from the Senator and Congressman to Mom and my sister as well as to the Surgeon General of the Army and the Commanding General at Fitzsimons. Steps were taken to remedy the situation and housekeeping became more focused and sanitation did improve. It was not until I was in Independence on Medical Leave from mid-December 1968 to mid-January 1969 and Mom shared the letters with me that I became aware of what she and my sister had done on behalf of me and the soldiers assigned to Fitzsimons.

Shortly after arriving at Fitzsimons, I received a couple of phone calls from classmates. Roger Brown was attending RPI and completing a Masters Degree and would be assigned to the Math Department at West Point. He was checking up on me and how I was doing and he told me that September 17 had not been a total loss. Walt and Nancy Bryde's son, Walter Charles, was born that day. Seems I would always be able to remember his birthday. And Bill Miller called and he brought me up to date on his plans to attend UMKC where he would pursue a Masters Degree in English and was tentatively slotted to return to the English Department at West Point. Walt Bryde was back in Vietnam serving with the 9th Infantry Division with an artillery battalion, part of what was called the Riverine Force on the waters of the Delta in Region IV. And Judy Clark returned to the mainland from Hawaii and relocated to the Denver area. It sure was great to see her again.

In mid-October a large envelope was delivered to me and inside I found more than 30 letters that had been written to me at various addresses along the evacuation trail from Vietnam to Fitzsimons. One of the letters was from Colonel McDonald, Commander, 2nd/32nd Artillery, saying that all my personal belongings had been collected from Fire Base Saint Barbara, inventoried, and packed for shipment to me. When he received a copy of the orders assigning me to Fitzsimons, my property would be shipped to me. He said he had removed my checkbook, checks and some papers from my belongings and was sending those items separately via Registered Mail.

One of the letters was from the Finance Office in Vietnam and it contained my August pay. One problem though; the check was not good outside Vietnam as it could only be cashed for the funny money or Monopoly money called Military Payment Certificates (MPC) used there. I called the Finance Office at Fitzsimons and they arranged to have the MPC check picked up and replaced.

My twice a day therapy sessions continued as my stumps healed. There was still quite a bit of edema (swelling) but that was gradually subsiding. The therapists took measurements each day and noted I would soon be going to Denver to a prosthetist for fittings of my initial artificial legs. That sure sounded good to me. I had begun eating in the mess hall and liked this much better than eating in my room. I was getting more exercise, the food tasted better, I could feel my muscles toning up, and I knew I was getting better. But I was still skinny as could be having lost a lot of weight since being wounded.

I attended my first amputee clinic where the therapists told the doctors I was making good progress and was now ready for the initial fitting of artificial limbs. There were several commercial artificial limb dealers on contract and I was assigned to a

company named Ivan Long Prosthetic Company. There were rides to Denver and Ivan Long's where Ivan himself did all the measuring and making tracings of my stumps. By mid-November I had taken delivery of my new legs and was using them as often as I could. The therapy department insisted on keeping the legs in their department until I had gained more stamina and endurance. The sockets were made of wood and were hand carved by Ivan Long using the measurements and tracings he had taken on my first visit with him. It took many days to complete the carvings and make adjustments during the fabrication process. [This was 1968. Fast forward to 2008 and the fabrication and fitting process has been reduced to one or two days using plastics and endoskeleton components.] Learning to walk again progressed from using parallel bars to a walker to forearm crutches to canes. Then I had to relearn stairs, ramps, grass, dirt, gravel, sand, etc. And how to get back upright onto the prostheses after falling, now that was quite a trick and lots of effort expended. [Note to self; don't fall!] I worked with my therapist on a daily basis, and the more I worked the more my stumps began to get used to the sockets. The swelling in my stumps decreased and with the resulting change in shape, there was some irritation and skin breakdowns requiring me to stay out of them until the abrasion healed. On again, off again, but it was getting better and better each day. My goal was to get secure enough and confident enough that I would be allowed to take some leave and go to Kansas City for Thanksgiving.

Try as I might I just could not build up my endurance enough to use the prostheses for more than an hour or two each morning and again in the afternoon. The trip to Kansas City for Thanksgiving was off. But, Mom and Dad came to Denver for Thanksgiving and that gave me a chance to introduce them to Judy Clark. And wow, did Judy ever make an impression on Mom. Judy closed up my wheelchair on one of Mom's fingers while getting the chair ready to load into the car.

One of the more memorable soldiers and fellow amputee on Ward 5 East was a Chicago native, Jim Brunotte. Jim had served in an MP Company and was assigned as a jeep driver the day of his injury. A road mine had been detonated just as he drove the jeep across the place where the mine had been emplaced. The explosion blew up under the wheel well on the driver's side of the jeep. Jim sustained major injuries; right and left legs amputated above the knees, right arm amputated below the elbow, and the enucleation of his right eye. Jim had been fitted with a prosthesis for his arm as well as an eye prosthesis. He had been provided with a one-arm drive wheelchair and could maneuver it wherever he wanted to go.

Physical therapy scheduled swimming for those of us who were interested and both Jim and I signed up. We would wheel ourselves from the main hospital building to the gymnasium and indoor swimming pool. Getting to the pool before anyone else allowed us time to go into the locker room, change into our swim trunks, and go into the pool area before the rest of the group arrived. It was a nice sized pool complete with shallow and deep ends and two diving boards, high and low, at the deep end. Jim and I parked our wheelchairs alongside the benches next to the wall at the deep end. Getting into and out of the chairs had become almost second nature to us by now so we got down onto the pool deck and made our way towards the ladder at the rear of the high board. Using the handrails on the ladder we managed to boost ourselves up one step at a time to

the diving board. We began to scoot forward to the end of the diving board just as the therapist and several more amputees entered the pool area from the locker room. The therapist announced, "Don't climb up onto the diving boards. All of you will go to the shallow end to enter the water." The announcement was too late for Brunotte and me. We were already up there when the therapist saw us. "Get back down here, now." he yelled at us. "And be careful, don't hurt yourselves." Jim and I looked at one another and we agreed we were not going back down the ladder. That was too dangerous. So one by one we each did a cannonball off the diving board into the pool.

There were also skiing trips arranged for us. We borrowed parkas, gloves, scarves, woolen caps and maybe goggles but I really don't remember using them. We were loaded onto a bus with our wheelchairs and off we went to a ski area west of Denver. At the ski area we were paired up with a member of the ski patrol who was to be our instructor, mentor, and safety net all rolled into one. The ski's used by the double leg amputees was quite a contraption. Two ski's were anchored together parallel to one another with an "A"-frame like device that had a tractor seat welded on top and a seat belt added for safety. We also had a pair of cut down ski poles to help with balance. Once we had transferred from wheelchair to the tractor seat on our modified ski's and strapped on the safety belt, the ski patrol members would push or pull us around the lower level area to get a feel for the ride. If we leaned too far one way or the other it was very easy to tip over. Then we needed assistance to get upright once again. Now it was time to take the ski lift up to one of the ski runs. The lift was stopped and started as each of us got onto the lift chair with our ski patrol member holding onto our special skis. The same stop and start was repeated at the top of the run. The ski patrol members got us onto our skis once again and then each of us were tied with a tether, a rope around our waist and the other end around a member of the ski patrol. Two or three trips down the slope and it was time for the return trip to Fitzsimons. On our next trip to the ski area time speeded up and we got in several more trips down the slope. Then at the top of the run it was Brunotte again. "I'll meet you guys in the bar" he said. And off he went, swoosh, straight down the slope towards the bottom. He had managed to undo his tether and was on his own putting into practice a perfect example that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. And Brunotte's assigned ski patrol member, what was he doing? He began a chase but Jim was first to the bottom of the hill. And sure enough when the rest of us got to the bottom of the slope there was Jim sitting in his chair inside the bar having himself a beer.

With all of the exercise involved in swimming, skiing and the daily practicing with my prostheses, I soon had my prostheses with me all the time. I would walk around the corridors, use the elevator, and use the stairs to go from one floor to another, all while using two canes for extra balance. And I went to see Colonel Brown, the Chief of Orthopedics, to let him see me up and walking. I was not confined to bed as he had declared during Grand rounds that first week of October, five days after I arrived at Fitzsimons. He told me he got the answer he wanted with my reaction. It was a challenge from him. He wanted to see what I did. If there was no reaction, then I was going to be a hard case and one the medical staff would probably labor with for weeks and months. But my verbal and physical reaction told him I had a fire in my belly and I would progress in a timely manner. I told Colonel Brown I was eager to have my Medical Board and

Physical Evaluation Board (PEB) as soon as possible and I was planning to request a waiver to remain on active duty. Colonel Brown gave me his opinion that I was fooling myself if I thought the Department of the Army would grant me a waiver. He said I should try not to be too optimistic.

I took some medical leave over the Christmas holidays and was able to fly to Kansas City and stayed with Mom and Dad. Returning to Denver in mid-January, I learned I had been promoted to Major on January 6, 1969. I was back on Ward 5 East for several weeks before I was discharged from the ward and moved to the BOQ in early February.

Towards the end January I had a thorough physical examination with all sorts of lab tests. The results were the basis for the Medical Board findings that were presented to the PEB. The Medical Board findings identified my specific disabilities and the determination was made that I did not meet the current medical fitness standards for further military service because of the amputation of both legs. In early February I had my hearing before the PEB. I submitted a request to remain on active duty and to be included with the PEB recommendations that would go to the Department of the Army for final action. A few days later the results of the PEB were given to me. The PEB recommended I be awarded 100% permanent disability and that I be permitted to remain on active duty. All of the documentation was forwarded to the Office of Personnel Operations at the Department of the Army in Washington, DC. I was told it could take as long as 60 days for action to be completed. It was time now to wait.

Living in the BOQ was nice from a privacy perspective. Basically I had a room with access to a bathroom and the bare furnishings of a bed, table, lamp, chair, and wastebasket. No phone in the room. If I wanted to make or receive phone calls at the BOQ, the only phone was a pay phone that was located up two flights of stairs on the second floor. I ended up making almost every call from a phone at the main hospital. I continued with therapy each day at the hospital and ate meals in the mess hall. I had been assigned a post office box at the hospital, another reason to make the daily walks. My stamina and endurance were improving all the time and I now found it somewhat easier to get up and down steps, curbs, and ramps.

I continued my daily trips to the main hospital where I ate meals in the mess hall, checked my post office box for mail hoping to get word on my request to remain on active duty, checked in with Jim Brunotte and others on Ward 5 East, and continued to work in physical therapy. Ivo Lively, Dad's friend who lived in Denver, visited a few times and we got in several games of cribbage. And Judy Clark visited me almost every evening after she got off work. Lots of mail from Mom and Dad but the elusive letter from Department of the Army seemed it would never arrive. I did receive a letter from my former Tactical Officer at West Point, Major Thurman. He was a Colonel now assigned to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in the Pentagon following a 3-year tour of duty in Vietnam. Although assigned to the JCS, he was attending Harvard Business School, what he called a "finishing school." He said he was learning all sorts of useful techniques. Instead of saying, "BS" he now says, "Incredible!" And in a letter from my first Battalion Commander at Fort Carson, Colonel Josiah Wallace, he was now stationed in England after a 26-month tour of duty in Vietnam. It was his first tour of duty in

Europe in more than 23 years of service and he and his family were delighted. Colonel DeArment, Commanding Officer, 23rd Artillery Group, wrote again checking on my progress.

Finally, around mid-March I received notification that the Office of Personnel Operations at the Department of the Army had acted on my request for continuation on active duty. The request was approved. At the same time I received new orders for my assignment to the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I departed Fitzsimons and went to Independence, Missouri, where I purchased a new car and had hand controls installed. I also acquired a wheelchair for use at night after taking off my prostheses.

I reported to Fort Sill and found myself assigned to the Office of the Director of Instruction (DOI). The location of DOI was on the first floor of the school headquarters and I found it easy to negotiate the single step up at the door to the building. I checked into the BOQ and got a room in the high rise, a 5-story building. I was on the 2nd floor and had elevator access making my daily trips easy enough. On the first floor of the BOQ is a snack bar with kitchen that serves three meals daily, a laundry and dry cleaners and a bar. Close by is a separate mess hall where meals are available each day. In the snack bar one evening a few weeks later, I met a nurse who had been assigned to the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi, Vietnam, during the time I had been a patient.

Early on I was eating supper one evening at the mess hall when, after taking a bite of salad, felt a tooth break. One of my molars had sheared off and I would go to the dental clinic at the hospital for an exam. After my initial visit to the dental clinic where I received a temporary crown for my sheared off molar, I checked in with the orthopedic clinic. As an amputee, I'm a rarity for them. The best they can do on a continuing basis is referring me to a brace and appliance shop off base in Lawton for minor adjustments and supplies. Anything more and I will be sent to Brooke Hospital in San Antonio, Texas, where they have the facilities to really assist me.

In June I received a letter from Walt Bryde telling me he has orders assigning him to Fort Sill and he and Nancy and the children should arrive in September. Anne-Tove wrote that she and the boys were going to New York to meet her brother, Anders, and they would then go on to Norway to attend Anders wedding. They were planning to spend nearly two weeks in Norway before returning to Albuquerque.

In July I began having problems with my stumps. I visited the brace shop in Lawton and the prosthetist told me the sockets needed to be replaced. I went to the orthopedic clinic at the hospital to discuss my options. The clinic would contact Brooke Hospital and arrange for me to be transferred. I checked into Reynolds Army Hospital (RAH) on July 29, spent the night, and was on the air-evacuation flight to Brooke the next day. I had plans to have my legs checked and worked on as necessary, then return to Fort Sill. I thought it would take two or three weeks. At Brooke, I received a new prosthesis for my right leg and a new socket for my left leg. I did not transfer back to Fort Sill until October 24, 1969.

In early August I had my consultation with the doctors and prosthetists at Brooke Hospital. They evaluated my walking, took x-rays, and examined each stump. The

decision was to refit me with a new socket on my left leg and to completely refit my right leg. There would be no need for any surgery. My stumps are just healing and reshaping and this type of refitting is considered normal and expected.

Bill Miller stopped in for a visit in late August. He was taking some leave and making a trip around Texas visiting relatives before returning to Kansas City and graduate school at UMKC. He had talked with Walt Bryde and said Walt returned from Vietnam early with his unit. They were part of the 9th Division that was being pulled out of Vietnam. Walt is to report to Fort Sill by September 15.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has a Claims Representative in the local office who visits Brooke Hospital each week. He provides assistance in the filing of claims for Social Security Disability. I needed to write to Jefferson City, Missouri, to obtain a certified copy of my birth certificate to support my claim. My claim was processed quickly and in late September I received a letter and a check from SSA. The letter stated my claim was approved effective April 1969, and I was eligible for a minimum of 12 monthly payments before a reevaluation would be made whether or not my eligibility would continue. The Claims Representative told me my reevaluation should determine I had a continuing eligibility.

I had left my car in the hospital parking lot when I came to Texas. I contacted Walt after he was settled at Fort Sill and asked him to check on the car for me. I also sent him the car keys and asked him to start it up and drive it a bit if that was possible. He wrote that he checked my car out and it is running fine and all seems okay. He has a contact in the Military Police (MP) unit at Fort Sill and arranged to have my car moved to the MP security area for storage until I return.

I returned to Fort Sill on October 24 and was admitted to Reynolds Army Hospital. I had a single room all to myself. I requested another Medical Board and Physical Evaluation Board with the intention to retire for disability. Day to day while waiting for the process to be completed I spent time each morning and afternoon in Physical Therapy getting used to my new legs. I was free to come and go on weekends and at other times too; all I needed to do was sign out and in with the nurse's station. My retirement from the Army was effective January 31, 1970. I would now live my Army career vicariously through Walt Bryde, Roger Brown and Dennis Reimer.

