

Combat Support

By Monica Soladay



After Italian-American

Army Staff Sergeant Brian

Mancini was injured in

Iraq, he and his wife Ashley learned just

how strong their marriage could be.

Staff Sgt. Mancini and his wife, Ashley Mancini, at home in Maryland.

Whether using red sauce, alfredo or pesto, 29-year-old Brian Mancini loves to cook and it shows. Once the army staff sergeant from Phoenix, Arizona, starts talking about the dishes he learned to prepare by watching his Italian grandmother, he is all smiles, gesturing to show how he makes his own meatballs and exchanging knowing glances with his wife, Ashley, 23. “It’s like an expression; it’s an art for me,” he enthuses. “It’s a great opportunity to bring friends and family together.”

That opportunity doubtlessly means far more to his friends and family this year. Last July, Mancini was injured by a roadside bomb while serving in Iraq, suffering a traumatic brain injury and losing an eye. He and Ashley, who was also serving in Iraq and has since been reassigned, are living in Maryland while he receives outpatient care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Doctors are amazed by his recovery. But despite his many surgeries, Mancini credits his wife and family with truly helping him heal, noting, “Doctors can do medical procedures but it takes a good family and an awesome wife to allow you to persevere past the inner wounds once you’ve been hurt.”

Born into a family with a proud history of military service, Mancini joined the Army after graduating high school. He served in Honduras and the Caribbean before moving on to civilian life. But after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, he reenlisted and served two tours of duty in Iraq, leaving behind his peaceful lake home near his last base in Kansas, where he loved to go fishing.

The decision to return to the Army was easy for him. “Being an American is why our families came here – for better opportunities and a better way of life. That’s all that our families could ever hope for as they struggled in their quest for a different country,” said Mancini, whose father’s family immigrated to the United States from Naples and Sicily in the early 1900s. “I think it’s our job as Americans to preserve that.”

Mancini first arrived in Iraq in February 2005. As a senior medic assigned to an infantry battalion, his job was to make sure those serving under him had the training and supplies necessary to save lives, and to perform life-saving measures himself when needed. When not in the field, his division would provide medical treatment to Iraqi residents, often setting up impromptu clinics that would bandage scrapes, dispense vitamins and blood pressure medication and provide health care to the poor.

On July 23, 2007, Mancini was on a mission in Baghdad with his battalion commander. Suddenly, an IED exploded next to the Humvee in which he was riding, tearing through the vehicle’s body armor, blasting open his forehead, jaw and palate and claiming his eye. He lost consciousness about five minutes after his injury.

“I remember getting hit,” Mancini said. “I remember thinking, ‘Wow, this really sucks.’ From being a medic, I knew the things that were happening to me, like my tongue beginning to swell, were not good.

“I put my head down. I told my driver to tell my then-girlfriend that I loved her and prayed that God would have his way with me. And then I woke up three weeks later in Bethesda.”

Bethesda, Maryland, is home to the National Naval Medical Center, a crucial stop for many injured soldiers, including Mancini, as it is the only Defense Department facility capable of comprehensive neurocritical care for wartime traumatic brain injuries.

When Mancini arrived in Bethesda, he had already undergone several rounds of surgery including triage at a combat support hospital in Baghdad, neurosurgery in northern Iraq, and reconstructive surgery in Germany. His forehead, jaw and palate had been rebuilt using titanium; he had suffered hemorrhaging in his brain in addition to multiple fractures and contusions to his cranium; part of the tissue on his brain's frontal lobe had shrunk from disuse and he was being fed through a tube in his stomach.

Waking up was incredibly overwhelming for Mancini. His whole family – parents, aunts, uncles, nephews, and siblings – was at his bed side; he was the focus of all their attention. “And here I am,” he reminisced. “I can’t even talk, can’t even walk. Having been in the military since I was 19 years old, I was very independent, very proud, and very much an alpha type of male. Being in that circumstance was very humbling for me to have my family see me the way I was.”

But perhaps more than his family, he feared the reaction from his girlfriend of seven months, Ashley Simpson of San Antonio, Texas, who was also serving in Iraq. “I almost didn’t want her to come,” he said. “I was just really afraid for her and how she felt.”

Back in Iraq, 22-year-old Ashley, a medical supply officer, had been taking a final exam online when members of Mancini’s unit knocked on her door to tell her about his injury. Ashley never finished the class. A month later, she was granted early leave and flew to the United States to be at Mancini’s side as well.

“She came in and whispered in my ear, ‘I’m not in love with your



Mancini served in Iraq from February 2005 to July 2007.

face, I’m in love with your heart,’ and just really put me at ease,” he remembered. “She crawled into my bed – and if you’ve ever seen a hospital bed, you know that isn’t easy – and just held me and really stayed by my side.”

It was at that moment that Mancini knew he was meant to marry Ashley, a petite brunette with warm eyes and a winning smile. He sent his mother and aunt to buy a ring for her, and proposed while still at National Naval Medical Center.

“It took about 25 minutes to get down on one knee,” he said with a laugh. “And then when I got down there, it hurt so bad because I had shrapnel in my knee. A nurse walked in on us and pretty soon the whole hospital knew we were getting married.”

The couple married in a brief ceremony attended by immediate

family during Ashley’s 18-day leave. And then the new bride packed her bags, traded her wedding dress for combat fatigues, and returned to Iraq.

The following months were perhaps the hardest. Mancini’s mom, Jackie Williams of Phoenix, Arizona, stayed with him through September, when she had to return to work. While Ashley served remaining time in Iraq and tried to arrange for a compassionate transfer to the Washington metropolitan area, Mancini was transferred to Walter Reed in September 2007 and focused on rehabilitation. In Mancini’s case, that involved learning to adapt to his head injury – identifying his difficulties and finding alternate ways of doing things. Today he is never without his trusty PDA to track appointments, ▶



(Above) The Mancini Family: Ashley, Brian, and their dog, Zeke. (Right) Mancini enjoying a fishing trip.



medicines, and other things. "I never had to [use one] before – I had a great memory."

Additionally, physical therapy strengthened Mancini's lower back, helping him regain balance and stabilization lost due to his head injury. Other work helped him adjust to depth perception issues due to the loss of his right eye. "Believe it or not, a lot of it was playing games like basketball, Jenga, and shooting pool," he said.

The couple stayed in touch through daily e-mails. Due to their circumstances, Ashley's unit let her use the phone in their company headquarters as often as possible, allowing the couple to speak about four times a week. "I kept her up to date as much as I could on all the surgeries and procedures that were taking place," Mancini said.

Just as Mancini's soldiers had once knocked on Ashley's door to bring her news of his injury, they now visited her to provide support and send good wishes, asking "How is our Mancini?" Their efforts cheered her, and it also helped to be surrounded by the members of her own unit, whom she had grown to consider family.

But even so, it was extremely difficult to be so far apart. "It takes a special person to be an army wife and the wife of a wounded soldier," Ashley acknowledged.

In January, Ashley received compassionate reassignment to Fort Meyers, Virginia, and for the

first time the couple was able to live together as husband and wife. They found a three-bedroom apartment off hospital grounds and adopted a dog named Zeke.

The Mancinis have received help from a number of nonprofits who assist injured servicemen and women. Soldiers' Angels has provided plane tickets and care packages while the Yellow Ribbon Fund provided a car for Brian's mother during her stay in Bethesda. On weekends, Project Healing Waters takes Mancini fishing.

The two are juggling payments on his home in Kansas and their rent in Maryland. And, having left their units behind in Iraq, they don't have many friends in the Washington, D.C., area. But what they do have, which is clearly a source of great strength, is each other. And one day, Brian and Ashley hope to start a family. "Our love for each other has just strengthened so much because of this," he said.

Ashley plans to leave the military when her term expires in August 2009 so that she won't be deployed and sent away from her family again. But Mancini wants to continue serving his country. "I feel I have a huge amount of assets ... I love to teach. I have this wealth of life experiences and would love to pass it on to the next generation of soldiers.

"I definitely feel that I have a calling to do something more. I try to remind myself of that every day." ▲

Reach out

The needs of injured service members don't end when they return home. Instead, many will have lifelong physical, emotional and mental struggles, says Marie Wood, vice president and director of communications for the Yellow Ribbon Fund, adding, "These heroes are going to need our support for a long time to come."

To find out how you can help service men and women in your home town, contact the following groups:

The Yellow Ribbon Fund

The Yellow Ribbon Fund was created in early 2005 to assist our injured service members and their families while they recuperate at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the National Naval Medical Center. The group provides rental cars for the families of injured service members in addition to organizing golf tournaments, ceramics programs, trips to Civil War historic sights and other activities.

www.yellowribbonfund.com

The U.S.O.

The USO is a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to support the troops by providing morale, welfare and recreation-type services to our men and women in uniform. www.uso.org

Project Healing Waters

Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc. is dedicated to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled active duty military personnel and veterans through fly fishing and fly tying education and outings.

www.projecthealingwaters.org

Soldiers' Angels

Soldier's Angels operates internationally to provide letters, care packages, and comfort items to the deployed, and support for their families here at home.

www.soldiersangels.org