

Plymouth sticks by Nick Eufrazio, slowly recovering from war wounds

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Many Plymouthers learned of U.S. Marine Corps Cpl. Nick Eufrazio's war injury on Thanksgiving Day 2010, when the former Plymouth South High School football player was recognized with thoughts and prayers before the town's annual football classic. Eufrazio, a 2009 graduate who played defensive end for the Panthers, was serving with the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, when shrapnel from a grenade wounded him and a comrade.

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Eufrazio, a 2009 graduate who played defensive end for the Panthers, was serving with the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, when shrapnel from a grenade wounded him and a comrade.

Eufrazio's friend lost an eye and the use of his arm in the blast. Eufrazio suffered a traumatic brain injury.

At the football game last year, the crowd prayed for Eufrazio's quick recovery, but it has been anything but speedy. Over the last 13 months, Eufrazio has seen more than his share of ups and downs as doctors and therapists work to restore his health.

Eufrazio is currently in a hospital in Florida, where he is making solid progress in his recovery. But brain injuries are always tricky, and even experienced military doctors are unable to offer a definitive prognosis.

So while details of his last mission remain somewhat foggy, the young corporal hasn't lost the bright personality that carried him through his formative years in Plymouth.

Just a year after doctors told his parents their son might never talk again, Eufrazio greets visitors by name and charms the hospital staff in much the same way he entertained teachers and classmates in the technical studies program at Plymouth South.

"We hoped a year later he'd be in better shape. He's still quite sick and fragile, but he's coming along," Suzanne Guenther, Nick's mother, said.

Guenther and her husband, Mark Eufrazio, try to visit their son at the James Haley VA Hospital in Tampa at least twice a month. Eufrazio's girlfriend, Jillian White, is usually at his bedside otherwise.

White traveled with the family to greet Nick when he returned from overseas in November 2010 and has been at his side “pretty much nonstop,” ever since, according to Guenthner.

“She has poured her heart and soul into his recovery. It’s heartbreaking that he can’t recover on a time table,” Guenthner said.

“He’s definitely improved from the last year,” White said last week after returning home to visit her family for Christmas. “He’s had a bunch of setbacks, but he comes back real strong.”

The oldest of two children, Eufrazio, now 21, appeared destined for a career in the Marine Corps from an early age.

Mark Eufrazio remembers his son talking about joining the military while still in elementary school, after watching the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

He joined the Young Marines and quickly distinguished himself as a model for others. A scrapbook in the family’s Stafford Street home is filled with commendations and awards, including his selection as the national Young Marine.

He was small of stature, weighing barely 150 pounds, but packed a wallop on the football field, earning the nickname “The Freezer” in a comparison to monstrous and hard-hitting pro football star William “The Refrigerator” Perry.

He studied plumbing at Plymouth South, and was always on track for the Marines and then the State Police force, joining the Corps right after graduation. At boot camp at Parris Island, he earned honors as the top recruit in his class of 300 and could have picked any assignment.

He wanted to become an officer, but he wanted to earn it the hard way, choosing to serve in the infantry.

In Afghanistan, he served as a designated marksman and went on two-man night patrols looking for terrorists planting roadside bombs. He spent only four and a half months in the country, but was involved in 55 firefights before he was injured Nov. 21, 2010.

Eufrazio and Lance Cpl. Kyle Carpenter had been under sniper fire all day. They were setting up sandbags around their rooftop outpost near the village of Marjah when someone got close enough to lob a grenade at their position.

Carpenter took the brunt of the hit, but Eufrazio was hardly spared.

He took shrapnel to both arms and shoulders, suffered a collapsed lung and ruptured eardrum and lost a finger on his left hand. He also took several pieces of shrapnel to the frontal lobe of his brain.

While Carpenter was seriously disfigured, Eufrazio’s face remained untouched. But treating the head wound proved difficult.

After initial surgery last year, he appeared well on his way to recovery and was walking with the aid of a walker and writing with detailed clarity when he was transferred to Spaulding Rehabilitative Hospital in Boston.

Eufrazio’s family now realizes the move was premature and a mistake.

When their son developed an infection, doctors at Spaulding were not able to help, and the military would not allow Eufrazio to be moved to any of the nearby hospitals.

He went instead to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., where he suffered through debilitating seizure-like episodes known as storming before doctors were able to stabilize his condition.

By the time he was moved to the hospital in Florida, Eufrazio weighed less than 100 pounds.

He has continued to get stronger in Florida, however, and has been able to sit up on his own and talk. He remains foggy about the exact details of his injury but gets daily therapy to restore muscle control and increasingly is able to talk with staff and visitors. White said he especially enjoys hearing her read letters he gets from school children back in Plymouth.

Though the family remained intensely private about Eufrazio's injuries through much of the long last year, word has begun to spread through friends and the public is showing its support.

Last summer, a golf tournament was held in Nick's honor in Easton to benefit the Semper Fi Fund, a charity that assists the families of injured Marines. Earlier this fall, a friend raised thousands by a Marine Corps marathon in Eufrazio's honor with her team, "Fight for Freezer."

The local post of the VFW has assisted as well, welcoming Eufrazio as a member and helping the family with travel expenses. Most recently, Mark Eufrazio's fellow employees at Jordan Hospital organized a series of raffles to help the family. Virtually every shop in town offered a prize.

(The family wishes to thank friends and family, VFW Post 1822, the Semper Fi Fund, Jordan Hospital, Old Colony Young Marines and all who have continued to think of Nick.)

The family, including White, who has taken time off from school to be with her boyfriend, is sometimes able to stay in houses reserved for family members while visiting the hospital. They travel with reduced airfare as well, but the costs mount.

The greater obstacle, meanwhile, may be administrative.

While they are pleased with Nick's progress in Florida, Eufrazio's parents know their son will eventually be discharged from active duty sometime next year and fear his access to top-notch doctors and therapists will disappear when that happens.

Even now, they are desperately looking for a neurosurgeon who can give them a second opinion about the treatment plan prescribed by military doctors. Eufrazio's little brother, Andrew, went so far as to send off a letter to the world's foremost brain surgeon asking for help. Heartbreakingly, the doctor replied that he could not offer an opinion without reviewing the records, but only worked with children anyway.

Veterans Agent Roxanne Whitbeck and a representative from U.S. Rep. William Keating's office have been working with the family to ensure Eufrazio continues to receive the care he needs.

If nothing else, the family wants to ensure others like him are never again put in a position where they are discharged from care before they are truly well enough to start rehabilitation.

"The frustration now is we don't want him to lose the progress he's made and get funneled through the system faster than he's ready," Guenther said.

Buoyed by the experience of severely wounded veterans they met in military hospitals, the family is still hopeful of a complete recovery in time. But they are also making arrangements to deal with any special transportation or living needs Eufrazio may have when he does finally return home.

The family is not sure their son will ever be able to realize his goal of becoming a State Police trooper, but still hope he might eventually be able to work with young recruits.

“We not sure he’ll be able to physically do anything very strenuous, but he still has his personality and sense of humor, and he swears like a Marine. I think he would be a good instructor,” Guenthner said.

Nick Eufrazio’s drive and determination is evident in the following poem he wrote for a classroom assignment Sept. 11, 2007, the start of his junior year at Plymouth South High School.

I am tough and dedicated

I wonder what our country will be like in 30 years (good/bad)

I hear my coaches whistle blowing after or before a play

I see a general issuing me my commission

I want to be a Marine officer in the Marines infantry

I am tough and dedicated

I pretend nothing; I get it done

I feel an immense pride building inside my heart

I touch the hot dry sands of a foreign soil

I worry that I’m not good enough to be an infantry officer

I cry deep down inside knowing how divided our country is

I am tough and dedicated

I understand that if I am to achieve my goals I must make important and difficult sacrifices

I say *Semper Fidelis* because when I am a Marine or a police officer I will be always faithful to my country, my corps and my state

I dream about only important events that are coming up like football games

I try to not let people down and make an effort to make things easier for everyone else by doing my part

I hope people wake up and see what I am doing and realize why I am doing it and part of it has to do with today’s date

I am tough and dedicated