

WAR HERO COMES HOME



Submitted Photo

Pinehurst area resident Ben Brown recently returned home after being injured while serving in the U.S. Army in Iraq. Brown, a 1996 graduate of Tomball High School, received a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star for his service.

Veteran rejoins family, adjusts to civilian life

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Decorated Iraq war veteran Ben Brown has rejoined his family in the Pinehurst area and is spending as much time as he can with his 18-month-old daughter, Alison Leean Brown. Brown, who was injured in the war when a crudely-made bomb was detonated with a cell phone a few yards from where he was standing, received a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star with a V Device.

Brown, a 1996 graduate of Tomball High School, enlisted in the army for the second time

soon after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. At that time, he was serving in the reserves after completing a three-year enlistment in the army soon after graduating high school.

But all of that is behind him now. He arrived home earlier this month after spending about six months at Fort Hood. He's landed a new job in Ocean City, Texas — a two-hour drive — with a company that compresses natural gas and transports it to customers. He said the biggest adjustment to civilian life for him was the monotony of it all.

"It takes a little while to get

**Veterans' Day is
Nov. 11. Area schools
will be celebrating
Freedom Week
Nov. 7 - 11.**

used to," Brown said. "In Iraq, everyday was an adventure. Here, you kind of get bored. But I didn't have too much of a problem adjusting like other people I know."

Brown said his year-long service in Iraq was strenuous, especially on his family. When his last three enlistments were up, he was eager to get

home to spend time with his daughter.

"She's the reason he's out now," Brown's mother Marilyn said.

Brown said his wife left him while he was serving his country in Iraq.

"Iraq is perfect for that kid in you — if you want to live Black Hawk Down or all those movies about the Vietnam war," Brown said. "But it really would have been perfect if you could only do it for six months, it's that year-long commitment that scares a lot of people. They're afraid of losing their families. Of my six closest friends, five are

divorced, and the sixth is pretty sure his wife cheated on him."

The March 2005 issue of the military newspaper Fort Lewis Ranger reports that divorce rates are as high as 50 to 80 percent in some units returning from yearlong deployments. Brown said the combat pay while he was in Iraq was "outrageously" high, and he said he'd probably have \$20,000 in the bank right now if he wasn't "taken to the cleaners" in divorce court by his ex-wife.

Though Brown's relationship crumbled while he was in Iraq,

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he thinks it was the right thing to do. He supports the troops that are still fighting there and thinks the U.S. government is doing a great job in supplying the soldiers with what they need to secure Iraq.

“The war is being run well,” Brown said. “We had all the gear and weapons we needed. There was so much equipment, if you asked for it, you got it.”

Soon after Brown arrived in Iraq at Camp Cuervo — named after the first soldier from the camp to die in combat in Southwestern Baghdad — his platoon was dispatched to Sadr City, where Shiite Muslim insurgents staged an uprising against U.S.-led forces. It was April 4, 2004 — days before Brown’s birthday — when he would get his first taste of non-stop combat for days on end.

“There wasn’t anytime to rest — we didn’t want to lose Sadr City like the Marines lost Falujah,” Brown said. “We hung on to it by a thread. We would fight for days on end without sleeping. We’d stay awake with energy bars and Red Bull. Sometimes, we would huddle together and catch 10 minutes of sleep while a group of guards



Out of uniform and out of Iraq, Ben Brown plays with his 18-month-old daughter, Alison Leean Brown, inside his Pinehurst home. Brown recently returned home after being wounded in the war.

Photo by BRANDON MOELLER

patrolled.”

Sadr City — formerly known as Saddam city — is a 10-mile by 10-mile area within Baghdad, where a tenth of the Iraqi population resides. The area is known for its high Shiite Muslim concentration and mass poverty. Brown said former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, isolat-

ed Sadr City from the rest of the country. Sadr City’s 2.5 million residents sought autonomy from Hussein’s dictatorship, but until their liberation by American forces, Brown described it more like containment. Shiite Muslims don’t get along well with Sunni Muslims, Brown said, usually for differing opinions about the

Islamic faith.

“The Shiites generally like Americans — we liberated them — but when their high priest tells them to do something, they do it,” Brown said. “Our interpreters would tell us when a cleric announces a call to arms over the mosque’s loud speakers. That’s when we knew we were in for it.

But then they’d also call to lay down arms. It changes so quickly.”

A *Washington Post* reporter that was embedded in Brown’s platoon referred to Sadr City as a slum, where residents have no place to dispose of their waste.

“What got me was all the garbage,” Brown said. “There was sewage in the streets so bad it would drown our humvees out. We’d get stuck in the trash and sewage where the streets should be. The sewage system in Sadr City was bad enough under Hussein’s reign. But when the war began, insurgents would plant bombs in the streets and a 120 millimeter cannon shell sure can blow a sewage system to hell.”

One day while his platoon was planning a counter attack by gathering troops and vehicles just outside of Sadr City, Brown was injured when a five-gallon cooking oil drum loaded with 20 pounds of C4 explosives and ball bearings exploded yards away from where he was standing.

Brown’s platoon was fighting shoulder to shoulder with an Iraqi National Guard troop. As the consolidated forces were planning their attack, their vehicles

were lined up in a row in a trash field just outside the city.

“I was in the last vehicle and I had gotten out to smoke a cigarette,” Brown said. “And then the bomb went off. You could feel the heat and the noise — it was the loudest crack I’ve ever heard — it felt like I was being struck by lightning.”

The truck carrying the Iraqi National Guard troops suffered the brunt of the explosion, and no one in that truck survived. All that was left of the truck was a burnt out shell, peppered with ball bearing shrapnel holes.

“The blast blew out my eardrums and many others and a ball bearing hit me in the shin, leaving a nasty cut,” Brown said. “Now my hearing’s not as good as it used to be.”

Specialist Maxwell, who is in Brown’s platoon and was with him during the explosion, suffered an injury to his shoulder when a ball bearing travelled through it. Brown was recognized for his service by being approved by his superior officers for a silver star — the highest award given to soldiers in combat by the U.S. Army. He received a bronze star and a purple heart for his service to his country.