## After 300 Iraq missions, soldier killed by moose

SEWARD HIGHWAY: His family takes the Fort Rich-based 24-year-old off life support.

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Spc. Stephen Cavanaugh survived Iraq, but at a cost. For a full year, bullets whizzed past his head and bombs exploded around him.



Stephen Cavanaugh's car hit a moose Dec. 2, 2007. He was on life support at Providence until Dec. 6, 2007 when he was removed from the support.

When he returned to Fort Richardson in March, he had brain trauma from the many explosions and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, said his father, also named Stephen Cavanaugh.

Cavanaugh, who deployed to Iraq with the 98th Maintenance Company, was still trying to heal when his car hit a moose on the Seward Highway in South Anchorage last weekend. He slipped into a coma. His family took him off life support Thursday.

Cavanaugh spent the day Sunday with his girlfriend, Ronny Cupples, at her home near the Bradley House restaurant, lazing around and watching movies.

At about 9:30 p.m., he left to go back to the post. He gave Cupples a goodbye kiss, walked out the door, then came back. He'd forgotten to give her a love letter.

"He promised he'd be back," Cupples said.

Within 15 minutes, Cavanaugh, 24, was on his way to the hospital.

That stretch of the Seward Highway between Tudor and Dowling roads isn't well-lit, and seeing something alongside the roadway can be difficult, Anchorage police Lt. Nancy Reeder said. There's no indication Cavanaugh did anything wrong, she said. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"There was a moose -- a mom and a calf -- that ran out in front of him," Reeder said. "It's one of those things that happens in Alaska. A moose runs out in the dark and there's nothing you can do."

The impact flung the moose on top of Cavanaugh's Camaro convertible, crushing him, she said. The moose died in the crash and its calf ran off.

He was rushed to Providence Alaska Medical Center in critical condition. His brain was swelling, and he went into a coma.

Cavanaugh's family got the call saying he was in critical condition at about 4 a.m. Eastern Standard Time on Monday. They caught a flight up from Atlanta later that day.

A military escort awaited them at the airport, and they went to the hospital, where early in the week it appeared there was some hope their son might recover. But as time passed, Cavanaugh's condition wasn't improving, his father said Thursday afternoon. Cavanaugh -- Max to family members -- never woke up and doctors told them he never would, his father said.

Cavanaugh's family talked to members of Life Alaska, an organ-donor organization. His family decided taking him off life support and donating his organs would be the right thing to do, and what Cavanaugh would have wanted, his father said.

His family made the decision to unplug Cavanaugh's ventilator Wednesday. About 2 p.m. Thursday, they did, his father said.

"It's a difficult decision, but in Max's case, it was the only decision," his father said. "We wanted to make sure we gave Max every reasonable opportunity, but they said there was no reasonable chance for improvement."

He died at 2:17 p.m.

"Seeing him laying in that hospital bed gave the illusion that he was still here," said Cupples, 32. "It was traumatic, but he's helping so many people right now just by sharing his organs."

Cavanaugh joined the Army in June 2004, said Army spokesman Lt. Col. Jonathan Allen. He deployed to Iraq with the 98th in March 2006.

Cavanaugh was stationed outside of Baghdad, where he manned a .50-caliber machine gun on a convoy escort, his father said. There hadn't been a single, major blast that injured him, his father said, but after more than 300 missions, the relentless impact of roadside bombs exploding nearby began to take its toll.

By the time his unit returned from Iraq, Cavanaugh had developed some memory problems, along with post traumatic stress disorder, his father said. On Oct. 16, Allen said, he was assigned to A Company of the Warriors Transition Unit while he awaited discharge.

Even before his injury, Cavanaugh planned to get out when his contract was up, but he still loved the Army, his father said, and his decision to join was an important one.

"That's about the proudest we've ever been of him," the elder Stephen Cavanaugh said.

Fellow soldiers showed up at the hospital in force throughout the week, he said.

"Oh my gosh. It was constant," his father said. "They were staging people in the waiting room. He was just a guy you wanted to be around."

His family is planning a funeral Mass at home in Atlanta for Dec. 15, and they are flying back today to get the arrangements made, his father said. A memorial ceremony is also being planned on post.

Cupples has Cavanaugh's letters to remember him by. Even after spending the entire day together, he would go back to his barracks room and write her a love note, like the one she got moments before the accident, she said.

"So I kind of got his last words in a way too," she said.

The last line of his last letter: "I want to be your one."

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