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Viet vet's bride never wavered from his side

Families of severely injured veterans find their lives also changed forever

By Juliet Williams

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STOCKTON, Calif. — The telegram that arrived on Nov. 15, 1969, was not pessimistic: "Private First Class Johnny O Brooks was slightly wounded in action."

It gave 20-year-old Flora Brooks, recently married, no hint of how much her life was about to change.

"Since he is not, repeat not seriously injured, no further reports will be furnished," the telegram concluded.

Today, they are growing old together, but not in the way either had envisioned. There were no children, no exotic vacations, not even any more of the simple fishing trips they had enjoyed before Johnny Brooks was drafted into the Army — three weeks after their wedding —and sent to Vietnam.

He returned home without a leg and soon lost the other, along with his ability to speak and the use of his arms.

Today, Flora Brooks continues to serve as nursemaid and constant companion to a husband who is confined to a bed, unable to talk or move on his own.

She never imagined any other way: "I'm so thankful that we were married," she said.

Flora Brooks, now 58, is a pillar of compassion and dedication, a model for others coping with spouses returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with missing limbs or damaged minds. Nearly 30,000 U.S. troops have been injured in Iraq alone; about 600 have lost at least one limb.

Better armor and field medicine are keeping severely wounded troops alive at far higher rates than in previous wars, but their survival taxes the nation's medical systems and many families' ability to cope.

That has created financial and emotional burdens in families throughout the country, said Jim Weiskotf, a spokesman for Fisher House Foundation, which runs 38 homes where wounded veterans' family members can stay while they get medical treatment.

"There's no doubt that that takes a significant toll. In an instant, your life is just changed and can never be changed back, when you get the phone call that your son or daughter's been severely wounded," he said.

Flora Brooks' advice to families of other severely injured veterans is simple: Just get through each day, because thinking about a whole lifetime is too daunting.

"My heart goes out to them because they're just starting on this journey," she said.

Despite the tone of the 1969 telegram, Johnny Brooks was wounded so severely by a mortar explosion that he lost most of his blood.

"I'm way thankful. I'm the one that's still saying 'Please God, please God, don't take him yet.' "

Flora Brooks, wife of the severely injured Johnny Brooks

While being prepared for skin graft surgery on his shredded back, he went into cardiac arrest and suffered serious brain damage. He was not expected to survive.

Flora Brooks has cared for her husband mostly by herself. She leaves home only for brief outings and appointments.

She says she shares a rich, full life with her husband, who responds mostly through eye contact. She reads Scriptures to him, buys DVDs for them to watch together and talks to him while she does the intricate stitchwork on the patriotic quilts that adorn their home.

Flora Brooks knows that many people in her position would have prayed for an easy death. Instead, she prayed for her high school sweetheart to live, regardless of what that life might hold.

Johnny Brooks' mother, Ruth Brooks, still spends a lot of time visiting and helping her son and daughter-in-law. But even she depends on Flora.

"I still am not over it," she said. "She's so strong, and I'm not."

That resiliency has amazed Flora Brooks' family and friends, especially now that she also is caring for her mother, who suffers from dementia. She said she chooses not to dwell on her own twists of fate.

"I'm way thankful," she said. "I'm the one that's still saying 'Please God, please God, don't take him yet.'"

Above and below, courtesy of Flora Brooks

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