

May 31, 2008

Strong Memorial Hospital neurosurgeon saves lives in Iraq

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Before Dr. Jason Huang became a major in the U.S. Army, he faced tanks at Tiananmen Square, served three years of house arrest, signed daily confessions to the Chinese police, was blacklisted by the government, had himself declared mentally ill, used a fake passport to enter the United States and became a political refugee, an American student, an American citizen and eventually a neurosurgeon at Strong Memorial Hospital.



Dr. Jason Huang spent three months as a field hospital surgeon in Iraq.

To understand the story is to know that – behind his calm words and steady hands – there are pieces that can only be lived, not told.

"But here," says the 37-year-old, hands folded neatly Friday morning at the desk in his University of Rochester Medical Center office, "are the highlights."

Huang returned four weeks ago from a three-month tour of duty in Iraq, where he was stationed at the Balad field hospital as one of two U.S. military neurosurgeons in all of Iraq. There, he rotated between 48-hour shifts and breaks often interrupted by mass trauma and alarms warning of indirect fire.

With a 9mm gun always by his side, Huang operated on the brains of American and Iraqi soldiers who were injured by rockets, mortars and other explosives. He had performed routine craniotomies at Strong, surgically opening patients' skulls to relieve pressure in the brain after car accidents and the occasional gunshot wounds. But never before had Huang seen injuries so severe: scalps entirely disintegrated, brains exposed from blasts that ripped through helmets.

"There's no comparison with what you see over there," he said.

The workload came in waves. Some days, patients arrived with only mild brain injuries, and no surgeries were needed at all. Some days, all eight operating tables were filled after a suicide bomber exploded a marketplace. The work kept him occupied enough that there was little time for fear or thought, but the daily realities of war were constant reminders of danger.

After a week of military training at Fort Benning in Georgia and three days in Kuwait, Huang had learned the basics: what to say if he's taken hostage, what to do if his Humvee rolls over. The doctors joked that they were more of a danger to each other, wielding guns during medical procedures. The constant alarms warning of indirect fire became more of a nuisance than a fright.

But when a surgeon was injured after a rocket blew up a bus right outside the hospital in February,

Huang said his trailer, surrounded by sandbags but unprotected on the top, suddenly made him shudder: "Wow, this could happen to us."

But he believes his experience, in an air-conditioned hospital, was nothing compared to the soldiers' lives. What got him through the days were the other doctors and patients – the best group he had ever worked with, he said. "They don't complain. They tough it out.... Just follow orders and do the best to save lives."

But why did he enlist? Rewind to 1989.

Huang was an 18-year-old majoring in mechanical engineering at the University of Science and Technology of China. In his idealism, he organized a group of students to protest the Communist Party at Tiananmen Square, never expecting the military to respond by killing hundreds of protesters. The next day, Huang was told to report to the police station, placed under house arrest and forced to report back to sign confessions. "Every day, it was mental torture."

After three years, he convinced a friend whose family worked at a hospital to declare him mentally ill so that he could return to his hometown in Shanghai. In 1993, using a fake passport, he escaped to California and was eventually declared a political refugee and a naturalized citizen.

He later earned scholarships to Amherst College and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. So when he met a military recruiter at a medical conference in 2002 and heard of the shortage of neurosurgeons, he made up his mind.

"I thought I needed to give something back to this country."

Though Huang wasn't keeping count, he was told upon his return to Rochester that what he gave back was a 98 percent survival rate with the 1,200 soldiers he treated in Iraq. For his work, he received the Army Commendation Medal.

But the high survival rates are only short-term results, Huang said. Many soldiers return home and lack the necessary treatment, and many more with milder injuries never receive help in the first place. Huang is now working with Dr. Jeffrey Bazarian, a URM associate professor of emergency medicine and neurology, to investigate mild traumatic brain injuries in soldiers, a condition he believes is the "signature injury" of the Iraq war. He hopes to one day open a clinic to provide long-term brain trauma treatment to those injured in explosive blasts.

He shrugs off any amazement over his own life story and asks instead that Americans think of the soldiers.

"You have a certain opinion about a certain war, but that's irrelevant to the soldiers. To them, the most important thing is to protect my buddy to my left and right. So we just try to save their lives."

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