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Love and technology save dad's life

By LIZ GREENAWALT - GM Today Staff

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CEDARBURG - What do you get when you mix the devotion of two Marines, a liver 140 miles from where it was needed and a couple of wireless interactive pagers? A day-long ordeal which Cedarburg resident Tom Ripley and his brother Stephen undertook last July to save their father's life.

Tom, 33, said the experience was one he will never forget. Tom and Stephen, 37, are captains in the Marines and recruited the help of the Marine Corps and many other agencies and individuals to save their 64-year-old father, John, a colonel in the Marine Corps who earned the nation's second highest award, the Navy Cross.



News Graphic Staff

Brothers Tom (left) and Stephen Ripley used modern technology and old-fashioned ingenuity to provide a new liver for their father.

In 1968, John was in a helicopter crash in Vietnam and was covered in another person's blood. In 1975, John was diagnosed with hepatitis C, a blood disease which attacks the liver.

During Christmas of 2001, Tom said it was clear that his father would need a transplant and in July 2002, one was made available. About two days after that transplant, however, the liver failed. "Time, at this point is really, really critical," said Tom. "We're down to about four or five hours to find a new one."

About 7 a.m. on July 25, the family's doctors located another liver. "This was like winning the lottery twice in one day," said Tom. "It just doesn't happen." The only problem was that the liver was in Philadelphia and the family was in the Georgetown neighborhood of

Washington, D.C.

Tom and Stephen recalled a conversation with Marine Corps personnel a few weeks prior in which they were told that John meant a lot to the Corps as a hero and if there was anything it could do, to let the Corps know. "Basically, what they meant was, please know that our thoughts are with you," said Tom.

Once the brothers realized there were no other options, they decided to take the Marine Corps up on their generosity.

"My brother and I called the Marine Corps and told them that we needed a helicopter and they, remarkably, made a helicopter available to us," said Tom.

The Marine Corps helicopters, absent of all amenities including doors and windows, took off from Ronald Reagan International Airport without knowing how they would land in Philadelphia, how they would get to the hospital or how they would get the liver back to Georgetown.

While Tom rode the helicopter to Philadelphia, Stephen stayed in Georgetown with his father. Playing the day completely by ear, the brothers were able to communicate to each other about Tom's progress and John's status through wireless devices, commonly known as "blackberries."

These interactive devices, which were operating on Cingular's Mobitex Network, are basically like a cross between a traditional pager and a Palm Pilot. Each of the men already had the devices issued to them through their respective jobs.

The devices were crucial in obtaining and bringing the liver back to Georgetown, Tom said. While Tom was in the air, Stephen was able to communicate with him and know that they were going to need an ambulance to get to the hospital and back, a service which Stephen subsequently set up with hospital personnel in Philadelphia.

On the return trip, another glitch popped up. The massive Marine helicopter was unable to land in Georgetown, too big even for the Georgetown University football field.

Fortunately, Tom said the Washington, D.C., Police Department heard about the situation and sent a small helicopter from its fleet to the airport to meet Tom and take him to Georgetown.

Also on the return trip, Tom was able to tell Stephen when he would be back, which enabled the doctors to prepare their father for surgery. "When we landed, he was ready to go and they just walked right into the operating room and put the new liver in," Tom said.

It took John 84 days to recover, but Tom said he is now back to his active lifestyle. In fact, John and Tom went skiing together about six weeks ago. "This course of events was a confluence of many, many people doing many things on my father's behalf," said Tom. "In the

end, it really came down to my brother and I being in the right place at the right time with the right device. Everything just kind of lined up there.”

While the events of this transplant saved the brothers' father, it also drew nationwide attention. Apparently, a man at the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association (CTIA) heard about the brothers and contacted Cingular Wireless, which nominated the brothers for a VITA Wireless Samaritan Award.

The brothers, along with 12 other people, received the VITA awards at the CTIA Foundation dinner ceremony on May 20. VITA is the Latin word for life and was chosen by the association to represent the award designated for those who use their wireless technology for emergency situations.

Tom said that while receiving the award felt great, he felt a little guilty because there were so many other people involved. “We would have never gotten to that day had it not been for literally hundreds of people doing remarkable things,” said Tom. “There were the nurses and the doctors and the Marine Corps and the police and everybody else who did so much to get us there. My brother and I were just able to help in a unique way and it worked out well.”

This story appeared in the News Graphic on May 29, 2003.