

Heroic Intersection

Nebraska Army Guard Soldier honored for coming to injured Airman's aid

By Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon
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Master Sgt. Rhonda McClellen left her home the morning of Sunday, Nov. 15, for her regular Guard drill at the Nebraska National Guard air base in Lincoln, Neb.

Little did she know, she wouldn't make it in that morning.

As McClellen, an 18-year Nebraska Air National Guard chaplain's assistant with the 155th Air Refueling Wing, exited the east-bound lane of Interstate 80 to head towards the air base she remembers deciding to use the northern lane because there were several cars in the other lane.

She slowed until the traffic light turned to green and entered the intersection.

The next thing she remembers is waking up in a hospital.



McClellen

As McClellen entered the intersection a northbound Chevrolet Blazer reportedly violated a red light and struck McClellen's Chevrolet Malibu in the driver's side of the vehicle.



Mutschelknaus

The force of the impact caused McClellen's vehicle to careen and strike a vehicle in the southbound lane.

McClellen was initially taken to BryanLGH Medical Center to be treated for her injuries which included a concussion, a hairline basal skull fracture, a jaw broken in three places, a punctured right lung, two broken ribs, breaks in each of the humerus, radius and ulna bones in her left arm, nine breaks in her pelvis, torn tissue in each ear causing hearing damage, and four knocked out teeth.

"I spent two weeks at Bryan..., three weeks at Madonna (Rehabilitation Hospital), and I was in a wheelchair the whole time," said McClellen. "I didn't get out of the wheelchair until February."

She underwent multiple surgeries and has a now has 10 plates in her body – three each in her pelvis and left arm, and four in her jaw.

McClellen said she remembers very little about the events of that day.

"I have no recollection of any impact," she said. "I woke up Thursday morning and I just kinda remember bits and pieces."

It wasn't until three to four weeks after the accident McClellen learned what transpired directly after the collision and was amazed by the story that emerged.

Army Cpl. Lucas Mutschelknaus also began that day making his way to drill at the same base. He didn't realize then that he would soon meet McClellen and forever be a part of her life.

Mutschelknaus, a special electronics repairman with the 267th Ordnance Company, was driving northbound on Cornhusker Highway about to turn west and head toward the air base when he came upon the unusually congested intersection.

Mutschelknaus parked his car knowing something was wrong and ran to the scene to see if he could offer any assistance.

"I ran over to the Blazer first... she was coherent and somebody was in there talking to her," said Mutschelknaus. "So I ran over to the Malibu and (saw) that the woman inside was hurt pretty bad."

Mutschelknaus said he knew something had to be done and instantly reacted.

"Somebody was already calling 911, so then I crawled in to the

car and saw that she was bleeding pretty bad," said Mutschelknaus. "I had somebody else crawl in the back seat to hold her head still and then I cut her seat belt off of her and folded her coat down out of her face."

"I cleared out her nose and mouth and then...got out of the car, ran around to the driver's side and pulled the window out and cut the airbags out to try to increase the airflow through the vehicle," he added.

Mutschelknaus waited with McClellen until an ambulance arrived while continuing to clear blood from her nose and mouth so she could breathe.

While recovering in the hospital, McClellen heard about all that Mutschelknaus and the other people gave to her. She said it was a bit overwhelming hearing the story.

"I had to step back a little bit," said McClellen. "Quite frankly it was amazing hearing all of the stories."

The story of Mutschelknaus' heroism also got the attention of others. He was honored with the American Red Cross Cornhusker Chapter Military Hero award during a ceremony held May 13 at the Champion's Club in Lincoln.

By the time of the ceremony, McClellen had recovered well enough to be able to attend and meet Mutschelknaus and thank him properly.

"I went to the dinner as a way to say thank-you for his efforts on my behalf so that other people would realize that it took a lot of courage to step up and be different...to step up and take action," said McClellen. "I was thrilled that he was honored."

"I think the world of him," she added. "I think he's just a great model of people that are in the military and people that we should aspire to be."

McClellen said she thinks Mutschelknaus epitomizes the hero award he received.

"I think that his hero award that he got really describes it," she said. "A hero isn't somebody that does things just that they do every day. It's something that they do when things aren't right and things are a little scary. So he was willing to just step up and help somebody he didn't even know."

For his part, Mutschelknaus thinks the accolades he is receiving are unnecessary. He just wanted to help and didn't want to regret passing by if there was anything he could do.

"I just figured that it wouldn't hurt if I just stopped to see if I could help," he said. "I'd rather take a butt-chewing for being late to drill than maybe finding out that I could have done something to help."

Seeing McClellen, who is married with 5- and 6-year-old sons, able to greet him during his award dinner was enough reward for Mutschelknaus.

"It was pretty overwhelming," he said. "When I had seen her in the car accident...she was pretty beat up... It's a pretty good feeling inside of me just being able to see how well she was doing."

"I know that she's got two young kids and a husband," he added. "It makes me very, very happy to be able to do everything and anything I could to make sure that they can keep enjoying the rest of her life with her kids and watch them grow up."

"That's the most gratifying part... just knowing that her kids still get to have their mom around and don't have to worry."

In addition to the Red Cross Hero award, Mutschelknaus was awarded an Army Commendation Medal, a Nebraska State Safety Impact Award and was named an honorary member of the Lincoln Fire and Rescue team. Still, he thinks the awards are unnecessary.



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon

Thanking A Hero: Master Sgt. Rhonda McClellen, a 155th Air Refueling Wing chaplain's assistant, thanks Cpl. Lucas Mutschelknaus, a special electronics repairman with the 267th Support Maintenance Company, May 13, during the American Red Cross Cornhusker Chapter Military Award ceremony. Mutschelknaus was honored for helping rescue McClellen after she was involved in a major accident, Nov. 15, while driving to drill.



Photo courtesy of Master Sgt. Rhonda McClellen

Lucky To Be Alive: Master Sgt. Rhonda McClellen's Chevrolet Malibu sustained massive damage when it was struck on the driver's side at an intersection near the Nebraska National Guard air base in Lincoln, Neb., Nov. 15. McClellen sustained multiple injuries in the accident.

"I think he's just a great model of people that are in the military and people that we should aspire to be."

— Master Sgt. Rhonda McClellen about Cpl. Lucas Mutschelknaus

"Just knowing that I was able to help her was by far enough," said Mutschelknaus. "I just wanted to be able to help her out."

McClellen said she feels fortunate that the accident happened at the intersection that both the Army and Air National Guard use during Guard weekends.

She added that the training the Guard members have received definitely showed.

"I think if it was at any other intersection, I probably would have died," said McClellen. "On both sides, the Army and the Air Force, the training gave them the confidence to know that they could help and do something – not just sit back and watch."

"I just thought our training had worked well because everybody that stopped at the accident to help I think was in the Air Guard or Army Guard," she added. "They all just took action...they saw a

need and they took action."

Mutschelknaus also credits his Nebraska National Guard training for helping him handle the situation as well as he did.

"I think a lot of the training that I got kind of helped me to recognize some of the things that were happening," said Mutschelknaus. "She had a bad concussion and she was bleeding out of her mouth and nose pretty bad...I figured she had some kind of lung injuries or chest injuries so I think that some of that training definitely helped."

"The combat life-saver training that we received last summer...I think that that helped out quite a bit," he added. "Through all the repetition that they go through... to not panic whenever you see something bad – just to charge in and do everything you can and just try to keep them safe to avoid more possible injuries."

With the injuries McClellen suf-

fered that morning, she said her military future is somewhat up in the air. She continues to recover with her main focus on gaining strength so she can pass the physical requirements to remain in the Nebraska Air National Guard to achieve the big plans she has for the rest of her military career.

"I had a lot of goals and now it's all kind of up in limbo...I would like to stay in the Guard," she said. "Before my accident I had 30 years in my brain."

"My personality lends itself, I believe, to being a first shirt," she added. "I was looking at pursuing that line."

McClellen said the support she received from Guard members the day of her accident is only rivaled by the support she has gotten since.

"Everybody has been very good to me and my family afterwards," said McClellen. "The Guard has always been important to me and that even made the Guard even more special when they just showed that extra level of caring when I was laid up and my family needed some help."

"It just made me even more proud that I was a part of the Guard and I was a part of people that would just jump up when they saw a need," she added. "Quite frankly, I think that's what they did when they joined the military, too. They saw a need and they said 'I can help here' and that's what they did and that's what they did at the accident too."

Mutschelknaus said he felt so strongly about helping at the accident scene because if the same thing happened to someone he cared about, he hopes people on the scene would have the courage to do the same thing.

He added that one person truly can make a difference, no matter how small or large their contribution.

"Always stop," he said. "Even if you're unable to be that somebody that's crawling into the vehicle, maybe you're able to try and direct traffic...there's always something you can do whenever there's a bad situation...the worst thing you can do is drive past."

"It's almost like there's never enough hands when there's an accident," he added. "You're not going to hurt anything by stopping, so people shouldn't be afraid to stop and see if they're able to help."