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1/1/2010 - BROOKLYN, NY -- A lot of Airmen are given nicknames or call signs for various reasons, but Staff Sgt. Monique Munro-Harris can honestly say she earned hers. She's known as "The Scorpion Queen." And all she had to do to claim that title was nearly die.

Deployed to Kirkuk Regional Air Base, Iraq, in August 2006 to support the fight against terrorism, Munro-Harris knew she might face rocket and mortar attacks, snipers, car bombs and improvised explosive devices. But it was an arachnid smaller than her pinky finger that nearly took her life. While she laid in bed during the wee hours of Nov. 16, 2006, the world's third most venomous scorpion -- a deathstalker -- stung her ... twice!

The sergeant, who was sent to the desert for five months to repair medical equipment, couldn't fix this.

"Truthfully, I wasn't that worried when I got stung," the 28-year-old New York native said. "But I didn't know what I was up against yet."

Munro-Harris had gone to bed late that night because she stayed up to watch the Michigan-Ohio State college football game. Her husband is a die-hard Ohio State fan, so she wanted to watch the rivalry match-up so they could talk about it the next day. But she had drifted off during the game and didn't wake up until she felt something crawling on her left ear.

"I was still half asleep, and I swiped at my ear with my left hand," she said. "Whatever was on there stung my ring finger. It hurt, but I guess I was still groggy because I really didn't react to it."

When she felt another sting on her side near her left armpit, however, she shot out of bed like a rocket, dancing around a bit and brushing herself off wildly as if she had ants crawling on her.

She calmed down quickly and started cautiously searching for her attacker.

"This time it had my full attention," she said. "I knew there was something in my room that shouldn't be there, and I wasn't going back to bed until I found it."

That's when she spotted the tiny scorpion lying between her feet.

It was dead.

Apparently, it fell on the floor after she jumped out of bed, and she unwittingly stepped on it during the ensuing commotion.

"When I saw the scorpion, it was so small that I really wasn't that worried," she said. "Maybe I was still a bit dazed because of awakening from a sound sleep, but I wasn't afraid. I felt 100 percent, not even a bit sick."

Still, her training took over. She grabbed an empty Q-tip box, scooped up the "bedbug" and walked it over to the base hospital.

When Munro-Harris entered the medical facility with the scorpion carcass and two puncture wounds not much bigger than the period at the end of a sentence, Maj. Amy Gammill, the doctor on duty, wasn't overly concerned.

"We weren't really expecting anything to happen," Gammill said. "We checked her vital signs, which were normal. She wasn't having any symptoms ... just swelling on her finger."

Nevertheless, the doctor told Munro-Harris that she'd have to stay at the clinic for the next six hours for observation. Meanwhile, Gammill started doing some detective work. Since she didn't have any experience with scorpion stings, she started making phone calls to poison control centers and contacting other physicians to ensure she followed the proper protocol.

The doctor also wanted to figure out what type of scorpion they were dealing with as soon as possible.

"Because if it was something really dangerous, time would be of the essence," she said.

Gammill took the scorpion and compared it to preserved samples they kept in the office. ... No match.

"So I decided it was time to wake up our public health officer to help in the identification," she said.

Photos

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Staff Sgt. Monique Munro-Harris felt something crawling on her left ear, just before being stung while deployed in Iraq. (Photo by TSgt Samuel Bendet)

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When the public health officer arrived, he looked down at the container, and his face turned white.

"This is a deathstalker," he said.

"That's bad, isn't it?" Gammill asked.

"Yes," he replied, the anxiety apparent in his hushed tone.

"I immediately went back to Sergeant Harris again to ensure her condition hadn't changed," Gammill said.

At first, the only reaction Munro-Harris had was the swollen finger that caused her to remove her wedding ring and attach it to her necklace. But now she was starting to feel differently.

"I thought my mind was playing tricks on me," she said. "I thought I just needed to calm down."

But her breathing became labored, and her throat tightened. Her hands started to shake uncontrollably.

"All of the sudden, I felt weak," she said. "I didn't know what was going on."

According to Gammill, the sergeant's cardiac and respiratory systems were starting to fail from the deadly cocktail of neurotoxins.

"This particular scorpion can cause cardiotoxicity -- basically kill you through heart failure," the doctor said.

"I remember them putting an oxygen mask on me," Munro-Harris said. "Then I don't remember anything else."

She had blacked out.

"The stakes rose when we found out that it was a deathstalker because we didn't have antivenin at our facility," Gammill said.

They woke up Col. Patrick Storms, the base's only flight surgeon.

"I was struck by the fact that they'd even call me at that point," Storms said. "Because usually with a scorpion sting, you just put a little ice on it, sit over in the corner for a couple of hours, and then go home as good as new."

By the time Storms got to the hospital, however, Munro-Harris was on a stretcher appearing in pretty bad shape.

The only scorpion antivenin stock that existed in Iraq was at Joint Base Balad, a perilous 45-minute helicopter ride away.

"Simply flying to Balad is very risky, because the reality is that you can be shot down," Storms said.

So they never decide to airlift someone out on a whim.

But the decision became quite simple when it came to Munro-Harris: Get her to Balad, or she would die.

With her eyes taped shut, a ventilator tube in her lungs, and her body "wired" to monitors that tracked her vital signs, they loaded Munro-Harris into an Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter.

"The first couple of minutes (into the flight), it's business as usual," said Storms, who monitored and treated her with the assistance of an Army flight medic. "She's got a good pulse, her blood pressure is good, her tubes are in good position. I'm actually starting to get pretty comfortable, and thought, 'This is going really well so far.' ..."

"You should never think that."

For just as the doctor allowed himself to feel somewhat at ease, Munro-Harris's blood pressure bottomed out like a rock.

"We had 20-odd minutes left on the flight, and she had no blood pressure," the flight surgeon said. "You can do that for about four minutes before you die."

Her heart didn't stop, but it couldn't generate an effective pulse that would pump enough blood to sustain her organs, the doctor said. They were now on the clock, with precious seconds ticking down toward doom.

Storms pulled out a syringe of epinephrine, the drug used to jolt the heart into pumping faster and more forcefully, increasing blood pressure.

"She responded just a bit," the flight surgeon said.

Storms was "walking a tightrope." Deliver too much medication, and it can throw the heart into a dangerous irregular rhythm called ventricular fibrillation, he said. But give too little, and the patient's system wouldn't have enough squeeze to generate blood pressure, he added.

Walking this fine line made the last half of their flight a second-by-second juggling act.

"I would dribble a little bit (of the epinephrine) in, assess her response, then we'd lose some ground," Storms said. "I'd dribble a little more in, assess her response again, then we'd lose some more ground. Probably more concern swept through my mind at that point than at any other time -- about not just having her arrive in one piece, but having her arrive and not end up a vegetable."

Hampering blood flow to the brain over an extended period of time can lead to severe brain damage, he said. And Munro-Harris had actually lost her pulse several times during the flight.

At one point, Storms considered administering an electrical shock. But using the paddles to send a jolt of electricity in-flight made him a bit nervous because the patient was on a stretcher with metal feet, resting on a metal litter stand in a metal helicopter. Luckily, they were able to regain a pulse each time with the adrenaline-boosting medication.

While the doctor had taken four syringes of epinephrine, he never expected to come close to emptying them all.

"But just a couple of minutes out (from Balad), I had to start using my final dose," he said.

When the helicopter finally touched down, medics carried Munro-Harris, whose heart was failing, at a full run.

"We got her situated in the trauma bay, and then administered antivenin very quickly," Storms said.

While the doctor desperately wanted to stay to see his patient through this ordeal, he knew his team couldn't leave the helicopter on the ground any longer.

"I was the only flight surgeon at Kirkuk," he said.

He had to return.

"It's difficult to leave one of your family members behind -- even when you know they are in good hands," said Storms, who is now the 31st Medical Group commander at Aviano AB, Italy.

As he boarded the helicopter, a dire thought swept through the colonel's mind like a desert sandstorm.

"I was of the opinion that we saved the patient, but lost the brain," Storms said. "I worried she'd be a vegetable."

As Munro-Harris clung to life, she spent about 11 hours at Balad, and then was transferred to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany.

After being unconscious for 14 hours, she awoke, and to everyone's relief, was responsive. She'd suffered no brain injury or other long-term effects.

"I woke up confused -- didn't know what had happened, where I was or how close to death I'd come," she said. "And I was in pain. It felt as though someone had been standing on my chest."

She tried to speak but couldn't, as she still had a tube running down her throat.

When she could talk, the first thing she did was call her husband and father, both military veterans, to let them know she was OK.

She had to stay in Landstuhl for another week and a half to remove fluid from her lungs and to meet with a cardiologist to get her heartbeat back in a normal rhythm after all the trauma.

"But as soon as I was better, I couldn't wait to get back to Kirkuk and finish my job," she said.

When she returned to the Iraq base, which is seemingly nothing but concrete, dust and suffocating heat, she felt only appreciation and contentment.

"I was so happy to be back," she said, "which is ironic because I cried like a baby when I had to leave my husband to first go there."

"As soon as she saw me, she ran up and gave me a big hug," said Gammill, who is now an internal medicine consultant at the Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine, Brooks City-Base, Texas. "We were thrilled she came back to us alive, healthy and with a big smile on her face."

Munro-Harris said, "I'm just grateful the military has such awesome doctors -- I definitely wouldn't be here today without them"

While she was gone, entomologists found a nest of deathstalkers and eradicated them.

"You have to remain vigilant and never get complacent when deployed," Munro-Harris said. "I had bought a bunch of Iraqi blankets from a bazaar, and the scorpions could have been in them. We are constantly warned about dangers -- including those from creatures such as scorpions, snakes and spiders. You just can't let your guard down."

When her deployment was completed Jan. 26, 2007, Munro-Harris decided it was time to expand her family.

"I realized how short life is," she said.

The sergeant welcomed her daughter, Monet, into this world May 9, 2008.

"Monet is the love of my life," said Munro-Harris, who has transferred to medical supply in the 111th Medical Group, Willow Grove, Pa.

"I consider the day I got stung my second birthday, because I came so close to not being here," she said. "So it's like I'm celebrating life all over again."

Only this time she's doing it as "The Scorpion Queen" and with a title she treasures even more ... "Mommy."

Munro-Harris's story is featured on a current episode of the Animal Planet Network series called "I'm Alive." To find out viewing dates and times, visit animal.discovery.com/tv-schedules/series.html.

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