

# Saved by Friendship

Eric Alva lost his leg to an Iraqi land mine. Brian Alaniz rushed to help—and lost his leg too. In the end, the pain of recovery was no match for the bond they forged



"It's almost as if we were meant to be friends," Alaniz (left) says of his connection with Alva.

They met in Kuwait last winter, two Texans a world away from home. Marine Staff Sgt. Eric Alva was a 12-year vet from San Antonio. Brian Alaniz couldn't afford EMT school, so in 2001, to gain experience, he'd joined the Navy as a medical corpsman. He was assigned to the Marines (common practice in wartime) and in January 2003 shipped out to the Persian Gulf with the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines—Alva's unit.

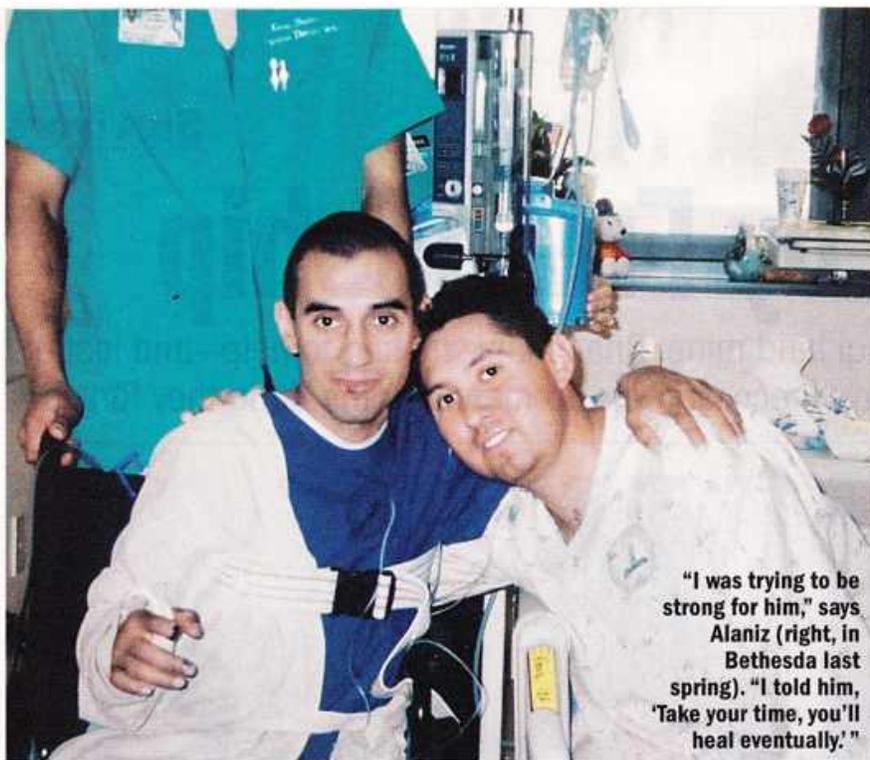
The pair bonded during a 10-mile hike when Alva, now 33, a marathoner, cheered Alaniz on; Alaniz, 29, returned the favor by tending to Alva's scratched cornea. Last March 21 they crossed into Iraq, and later that day they became two of the first casualties of the war when Alva stepped on a



Last April President Bush (greeting Alaniz) and the First Lady visited the hospital in Bethesda, Md., as did Michael Jordan and Sheryl Crow.



"I'm thinking, 'I'm skiing better than I'm walking. How backwards is that?'" says Alva (right, with Alaniz last December in Colorado).



"I was trying to be strong for him," says Alaniz (right, in Bethesda last spring). "I told him, 'Take your time, you'll heal eventually.'"

land mine and Alaniz, racing to his aid, did the same. Each lost a leg, but on the road to recovery—sometimes literally hand in hand—they forged a bond stronger than the frustration and pain they faced every day for months. Here is their story, as told to PEOPLE correspondent Anne Lang.

**Alaniz:** On March 21 our convoy was headed toward Basra. It was about 11 a.m. when we stopped. The area was sort of rural—sand and desert. Everyone got out to stretch their legs.

**Alva:** We were told to be careful where we walked. So we were all looking at the ground. It was when I lifted my eyes for just a couple of seconds that I stepped on the land mine. [Then] it was mass chaos; everyone was running around and shouting. It's weird, but one of my first thoughts was about two new guys in my unit. They were only 18 and 19, and all I could think was how scared they must be seeing all the blood, hearing all the screaming and realizing this was all for real—we were really in a war. Then I felt the medics cut the laces off my left boot. They never touched my right leg, which tells me I'd probably lost it by then. But I was too scared to look.

He had no idea that Alaniz was among the medics who rushed to his aid—nor did Alaniz know Alva was the injured one.

**Alaniz:** I was kneeling down, putting together a suction device, when the sec-

ond land mine went off right underneath me. I'd been on top of it all along, but it didn't detonate until I shifted my weight. I felt like I was on fire from midthigh down. Everything seemed in slow motion. No one came to help me at first. They'd been told to freeze, in case there were other land mines. Finally they picked me up on a stretcher and put me in an ambulance. I kept asking, "How bad is it?" They kept telling me, "You're going to be just fine," but they wouldn't meet my eyes—so I knew I probably *wasn't* all right.

Both men were taken by helicopter to Kuwait City.

**Alaniz:** [On the chopper] I really started to feel the pain. I handed the medics a little book I always carried, with the phone numbers of my wife and family. My hand was dangling off the stretcher and I could feel someone grab it. I gripped that hand for the whole flight. Only later did I find out it was Eric's.

Alva's right arm was blown open, his left leg was broken, and he was riddled with shrapnel. In a hospital tent near Kuwait City he was anesthetized. Awakening hours later, he groggily noted his leg had been amputated, then fell back to sleep. The next morning Alaniz, who still had both legs, woke up in the shock-trauma tent to find Alva sleeping in the bed next to his.

**Alaniz:** I looked over at him on that

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cot, and I prayed that he'd be okay. The next day, I was taken to a field hospital. I was fading in and out from the morphine, but I remember the doctor telling me the bones in my leg were too shattered to repair and that they'd have to amputate. It all began to dawn on me; I started thinking about my wife, wondering if she'd even want to stay married to me.

Alva finally learned that Alaniz had gone to his aid—and had also lost a leg.

**Alva:** I was like, "Oh, no!" The drugs were starting to wear off and everything hit me—losing my leg, causing Brian to lose *his* leg. I cried myself to sleep. When I woke up next, I was being wheeled to an airplane to take me to the military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. Brian was on the same plane, but we didn't know it.

**Alaniz:** In Germany they put us on a bus to the hospital. I felt nauseous. When the bus finally stopped, I started throwing up. A soldier below me said, "You better not throw up on me, man, or I'll kick your ass!" It turned out to be Eric—but I still didn't know it, and neither did he.

At Landstuhl, Alaniz visited Alva.

**Alva:** We both started crying. The first thing I told Brian was "Thank you" and "I'm sorry. If I hadn't gotten hurt, you wouldn't be here right now."

**Alaniz:** I told him I was just doing my job. I held his hand and told him everything was going to be all right.

On March 30 they were flown to Bethesda National Naval Medical Center in Maryland, where they asked to be roommates. Alaniz's wife, Ammi, stayed in their room almost 24/7, sharing her husband's narrow hospital bed. Alva's mother, Lois, was also a constant presence.

**Alva:** The blanket of love over us from both families helped our recovery so much. I kept getting bad news, though. On April 3 my right knee was amputated because there wasn't enough flesh left to close over the stump, meaning no room to connect a prosthesis. It seems I was crying all the time—everything hurt so bad. I remember telling my mom one night that I

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wished I'd died over there.

**Alaniz:** I never felt I didn't want to live. But I worried a lot. How normal would I be? One night when neither of us could sleep, Eric told me his detailed account of the explosions, and I told him mine. It was painful to revisit, but in the long run it helped us a lot. No one else in the world had shared that experience. We started joking a little after a while. It lightened the mood. We'd say things like, "Hey, we can get a two-for-one pedicure."

But dark times remained, especially for Alva, who recovered slowly.

For a long time, Eric didn't want to go to physical therapy. I think it was hard sometimes for him to see me, because within two weeks I went from a wheelchair to a walker to crutches. Eric would say,

“ I gripped that hand for the whole flight. Only later did I find out it was Eric's ”

"Wow, I wish I was doing as good as you." I pushed and finally persuaded him to get up and try. I knew from experience that once he got out of bed, he'd start feeling better about himself.

In April, Alva was sent to San Antonio's Brooke Army Medical Center.

**Alva:** After five weeks at BAMC, I could finally put weight on my left leg. The first time I was able to support myself [on parallel bars] for one full minute, I was so excited!

Now living with his twin sister, Alva has regained about 85 percent use of his right arm and gets around on crutches while he waits to heal enough for a prosthesis. Alaniz and Ammi were transferred to Bethesda so he could continue as an outpatient at the Naval Medical Center. In early December he and Alva were invited to Breckenridge, Colo., for the Disabled

Sports USA Ski Spectacular. Alva is an avid skier, but for Alaniz it was a first.

**Alaniz:** I was using my prosthesis, so it was a little scary. I was afraid I'd be on my butt or on my face all the time. But I didn't fall as much as I thought I would! Now Eric, you couldn't get him off the mountain. He'd do seven or eight runs a day [on one leg].

**Alva:** To be feeling snow blowing around you, sun on your face, wind rushing past your ears! Nine months earlier, lying in a bed where I couldn't even roll over, if someone had told me I'd be snow skiing by December, I'd have yelled, "Get out of my room, you lying sicko!"

In June, Alva will resume working toward a degree in physical therapy at University of the Incarnate Word—he hopes to become an athletic trainer—and vows to

run the marathon again. Alaniz and Ammi are expecting their first child in July. Still on "limited duty," he'll probably leave the service soon, perhaps to study X-ray technology. He and Alva have visited often and speak several times a month.

**Alaniz:** We still compare our therapies and our up-and-down emotions in a way no one else can. I want to do anything I can to help him, and if that means just sitting there listening to him complain—which he does sometimes, then apologizes—that's what I do. He will always be a part of my life.

**Alva:** It brightens me up every time I talk to him. I know he feels bad every time I have a setback, but he lifts me up with encouraging words. Brian is one of a kind. He's so quiet. But when it comes to stepping up to the plate with strength and support, he's No. 1—a true American hero in my book. He put his life on the line to help save mine. I consider him a brother. ●



"It's like we've known each other for years and years," says Alva (left, in Austin at Brian's parents' home).



# MailBag

As for Jen and Ben's breakup, I think it's for the best. Jen might come with some baggage, but Ben Affleck is so screwed up his issues have issues. **Christina Marshall** *Ann Arbor, Mich.*

then the second (and hopefully final) breakup, and now the whys and wherefores. Who cares?

**Mary Majorwitz** *Reliant Park, Texas*

## KERRY'S RUNNING MATE

After I read your story about Teresa Heinz Kerry, I thought, that's the woman we Kerry supporters know and love. Outspoken, funny, passionate—just a regular wife who happens to have \$550 million, knows five languages and works for charitable causes around the world, a woman who will get off a bus in the middle of nowhere to buy a \$20 pair of gloves and shop—all the while wearing her Chanel pumps. What a kick.

**Sandy Todd** *Florence, Ore.*

## GRACE UNDER FIRE

Richard Cohen has faced devastating diseases—multiple sclerosis and colon cancer—with dignity, humor and with no bid for sympathy. He and his wife, *The View's* Meredith Vieira, maintain a strong marriage and commitment to their family. His children may never see him play soccer, but he teaches them grace and honor daily. Kudos to the Vieira-Cohen family and all those who meet life's trials with quiet courage.

**Pam Northrip** *Seattle, Wash.*

Richard Cohen and Meredith Vieira's undying love is something most people will never experience in their life-

times. They are truly soulmates. I would wish them the best, but they already have it.

**Bonnie Daniel** *Vashon, Wash.*

## GOODBYE TO THE CAPTAIN

Captain Kangaroo brought a caring and stability to my childhood that my parents could not always provide. Thank you, Bob Keeshan; you'll always be a shining part of my childhood memories.

**Lisa Phillips** *McIntyre, Ga.*

## BUBBLE RAP

Scarlett Johansson is 19, correct? So can we assume that the glass of bubbly she is holding at a Golden Globes party is merely sparkling cider?

**Jim Sanfilippo** *San Diego, Calif.*

## FRIENDS INDEED

I was touched by your story about Brian Alaniz and Eric Alva, two servicemen who lost legs to land mines in Iraq—they were among the war's first casualties—and who went through the pain and frustration of recovery together. I was inspired by their strength, undeniable courage and unfailing friendship. Their story makes me proud to be an American. Thank you to all who are serving our country and to all your families for their numerous sacrifices.

**Andy Sendejo** *Buda, Texas*

## ANNIE HALLMARK

Diane Keaton is back on top? Diane Keaton makes a big comeback? She never went away. Thank you for a truly wonderful article about a truly wonderful actress. If I had any more admiration and love for this woman I would simply explode.

**Erick Fortmann** *Vernon Hills, Ill.*

## SPLITSVILLE

Thank God Jennifer and Ben are over! They seem like wonderful people, but as a couple they were a disaster waiting to happen. Hopefully they'll find other partners who will love them for who they are, not what they can be turned into (as Jennifer attempted with Ben).

**Andrea Chaffe** *Madison, Wis.*

I just knew this was going to happen. Look at Jen's track record: She already gave up two great husbands. It's a good thing it happened now instead of after they were married. Ben, you're too good for her. Find someone who really wants to settle down.

**Judy Young** *Schenectady, N.Y.*

Would someone please tell Jennifer that she doesn't have to marry everyone she goes out with.

**Charlene Thompson** *Winnipeg, Man.*

Enough about Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez. I'm sick of it. First we had to read about them dating, then being engaged, then the wedding plans, then the cancellation, then the breakup, then the reconciliation,

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