

# THE REAWAKENING OF CAPT. GREENE

**Trevor Greene not only survived an axe blow to the head, he lived to speak, move, write a book, and soon, marry. The story of a miracle wrapped in a love story. BY KEN MACQUEEN**

Canadian army Capt. Trevor Greene is talking. Really, it's hard to overstate how amazing that is. He's sitting in the big easy chair in the den off the kitchen of the Nanaimo home he shares with his fiancée, Debbie Lepore, and their 3½-year-old daughter, Grace. The voice is quiet, for a big man of six foot four. The thoughts are clear and unflinching. Words are rationed; the sentences short, stripped of extraneous weight for their march across the wounded terrain of his brain. Like when he describes first meeting Debbie in 2001, at what he calls a Vancouver bar and she prefers to think of as a restaurant. They were with separate groups at separate tables. "I looked across the room," the infantryman says, "and she captured me." That says it all.

Lepore, smiling, arches an eyebrow at his hyperbole. "Across the room," she says, "wasn't it about five feet?" He shrugs. "It was her smile," he continues, "and her laugh." Whatever the distance, they've been closer ever since. Except for his deployment to Afghanistan, of course. She wasn't there on March 4, 2006, when the platoon he was part of visited the village of Shinkay, when they sat with a circle of village elders under the trees, in the shade by the river. It was his last memory of Afghanistan. The Canadians had their helmets off as a sign of respect. Greene's job was civilian-military cooperation, to help villages in Canada's area of responsibility with access to clean water, medical facilities, electricity and schools.

The sad irony is, he was waging peace when



16-year-old Abdul Kareem stole up behind him, an axe hidden in his robes. He pulled it out in one fluid motion and with a cry of "Allahu akbar" (God is great) he buried the blade into the top of Greene's head, propelled by the sort of two-handed swing you'd use to split a log for the fire. Greene's eyes rolled back into his head; his blood, and, yes, some of his brain matter, spilled all over the Afghan ground. His brain was almost split in half, and yet he was breathing. Kareem reared back for another blow before three platoon members opened fire, killing him with a fusillade of bullets. Chaos reigned: the villagers fled, the platoon came under fire, medic Sean Marshall worked to staunch Greene's blood loss during a 40-minute wait for a rescue copter. An incredulous radio operator at the Kandahar base asked to repeat the type of injury. "I say again," responded platoon commander Kevin Schamuhn, "the nature of the wound is an axe to the head. Over."

By the time Debbie caught up with him, days later, he was in an American military hospital in Germany, in a coma, with much

of his skull cut away to ease the pressure of his swelling, fractured brain. The prognosis was awful: the doctors said that if he didn't die, he would be in a coma; if not in a coma, then in a vegetative state.

They might know brains, but they don't know Trevor, thought Lepore, who has been at his side ever since. Greene's aim was to aid in the wartime reconstruction of Afghan villages. Lepore's goal is to aid in the wartime reconstruction of her fiancé, and the father of their child—two near-impossible jobs.

Except here they are, almost three years later, Greene, 44, with a skull rebuilt with moulded composite plates, a full head of hair, and a brain that powers his thoughts, and his voice, and—with increasing success—his hands, arms and torso. "The recovery is like being frozen in a glacier and gradually warming up," he says. "First my left hand and my left arm warming up. Then my right arm. Then my neck, gradually my legs until I am all thawed out." Lepore laughs, surprised at the image. "I never heard that," she says, "but it's so true." Meantime, as the defrosting con-

RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR; PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN HOWELL



## DOCTORS may know brains, says his fiancée/drill sergeant, but they don't know Trevor

tinues, he's learning Spanish, which will be his fourth language after English, French and Japanese. And he is writing a book along with Lepore, which isn't bad for someone whose brain was sectioned with an axe. The working title is *Growing My Soul: Capt. Trevor Greene's Long Journey Home From Afghanistan*.

It will be a "motivational book" about their lessons learned in overcoming adversity. He teetered on the brink of death several times only to plunge into deep depression. She was relentless, putting her career as a chartered accountant on hold for the one project that matters most. Even during his coma she'd tell him of the example he'll set for others, "to be able to struggle through it and to share your insights." The book, they say, is all about determination and the power of positive energy. Hearing them describe it, watching them together, you have to think there'll be magic in it, too. You feel it, even stronger later in the

day when Grace, a blond bundle of light, bounds into the house, wearing a necklace from preschool made with drinking straws and paper hearts. Medicine and motivation only take you so far. The reawakening of Capt. Greene is a miracle wrapped in a love story.

**The axe attack** generated an initial flurry of media reports, but a fiercely protective Lepore ensured that the long road back happened largely out of the limelight. The exception—a beautiful exception—is the extraordinary access that Greene and Lepore granted to Sue Ridout, a Vancouver documentary filmmaker. By then, Greene, still largely immobile and capable of little more than yes or no responses, had spent a year at Vancouver General Hospital and was living in a private care home in suburban Langley. For 18 months Ridout and a camera crew documented his rehabilitation, much of it taking place at the highly regarded Halvar Jonson Centre for

Brain Injury in small-town Ponoka, Alta., south of Edmonton. The result is *Peace Warrior*, a chronicle of the road back, and a revealing window into the collateral damage of the attack on his platoon. The documentary airs Dec. 13 at 7 p.m., on CTV.

With months of recovery condensed into an hour of television, Greene seems to grow before your eyes, gaining weight, mobility and speech, with remarkable speed. In fact, it was "a marathon of baby steps," as the film notes. Until Greene and Lepore had an advance look at the documentary a day before a *Maclean's* reporter and photographer visited, there is much of those early days he simply didn't remember. He is pleased with the results, and believes it serves the purpose he intended. "I wanted people to know what it's like for Afghanistan veterans, what we went through," he says. "[Canadians] thought we were peacekeeping, and it was war. I wanted them to see the effects of war."

Ridout looks at two platoon members, Schamuhn and Sgt. Rob Dolson, who carried an unwarranted load of blame after the attack. Dolson, in particular, left the Afghan theatre early, agonizing over his failure to foresee the attack, though by all accounts he was the first to react. "I got up, took my weapon off safe, fired two rounds into him but he just stood there and stared at me. And it took another 10 more shots to drop him."

The cameras roll near the end of Greene's stay in Ponoka as a surgeon delivers the news that there's little likelihood he'll walk again, a prognosis they don't accept. The mood lightens moments later when, in a hospital hallway, there is an emotional reunion with Marshall, the medic, who last saw Greene

when he bundled him onto the chopper some two years earlier. He tells Greene: "It had a huge impact on me, and the person I am today."

The cameras also record Greene's plunge into depression, during the Christmas period in Ponoka last year. At one bleak point Greene stares blankly ahead, his eyes devoid of hope. "I was supposed to die," he says.

**The day Lepore** first met Greene, she was struck by his gregarious nature, his patriotism, and his unusual degree of frankness. Lepore's table of co-workers was making plans to a move on to a bar in Kitsilano. Greene's group, he announced, was heading for No. 5 Orange, one of Vancouver's storied strip clubs. "I thought, if he's trying a pickup here, that's not the best line," says Lepore. "But that probably means he's really, really honest." In fact, Greene later made a command decision to avoid the strip club, showing up instead at the



**GREENE** dreams of Afghanistan and of his assailant. 'We are friends.'

same bar as Lepore's group. They danced. They talked. She learned he was a journalist, both in Japan for Bloomberg News (where he wrote a book on Japan's homeless) and in Vancouver. He was celebrating this night, the completion of his book, *Bad Date: The Lost Girls of Vancouver's Low Track*—the first book written on the missing women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He told her he was also an officer in the Seaforth Highlanders, a Vancouver-based reserve infantry unit. His aim, he said, was to deploy to an overseas trouble spot, and to one day use that operational experience to join a United Nations aid agency. Compassionate, she thought. She'd never met an author or a soldier. "I was intrigued."

Grace was born by the time Greene got orders to deploy to Afghanistan, but that didn't change the equation. Lepore had known from the get-go this was his dream. "Even if I wasn't okay with it, I would never keep him from going." Besides, his job was to help Afghanistan rebuild—how dangerous could

that be? "He always seems—what's the right word—invincible," says Lepore. "Just everything seems to go well for him, so I never expected that anything would happen."

Greene knew better. To help the villages, you must get to the villages. During one such convoy their LAV III, a Canadian-made light-armoured troop carrier, bogged down in a river, stranding them under a full moon, a fat target for anyone with a rocket-propelled grenade. They were lucky that time. Not so in February 2006 when a roadside improvised explosive device rocked the LAV that Greene was riding in. Most of the injuries to the 10 inside were cuts and bruises, but Greene was removed to Kandahar airfield hospital with a concussion. It was the first time military personnel delivered bad news to Lepore. The second time, a 6 a.m. knock on the door a month later, was worse.

Before Greene left for Afghanistan, he taped a number of videos for Grace, his dear little "wabbit." There were pictures of him drying her from the bath; pushing her in the stroller; singing the ABC song. "My life expanded," he says of her birth. "It was like a new chapter of a new book." Of the videos, he says with an infantryman's clear-eyed practicality: "I thought if I died they would be the only thing she'd have to remember me by." He also wrote and sealed a last letter to Lepore, "in case I got killed, in case something happened to me." After the axe attack, with his life hanging by a thread, she ripped open the letter and read its contents.

The news those early weeks and months was as bad as bad can get. The doctors in Vancouver took Lepore aside and told her the optimistic comments about recovery she'd

made in a few early interviews were groundless. "He will not come out of his coma, and if he does, he will be a vegetable," she was told. Family friend Clare MacIntyre, who studied journalism with Greene at King's College in Halifax in the 1980s, recalls sitting with Debbie through meetings and hospital visits. "They're so in love and that I think is a huge part of his recovery. Debbie never, ever wavered in her belief that he would be fine," she says. "I remember going to one particularly grim meeting with Deb, at [Vancouver General]. I was there to take notes so she could concentrate on what was going on. It was really quite grim and I was really choked up. Debbie put her arm around me and said: 'Are you going to be okay? They sure don't know him, do they?'" It was Lepore who first noticed he'd emerged from a coma, after several weeks in Vancouver. She was reading him a friend's letter and she saw his eyes following across the page.

Greene spent much of his time in the intensive care unit. He fought off two near-fatal bouts of pneumonia, and a failed initial attempt to rebuild his skull that nearly killed him. "Fortunately I wasn't cognizant at that time," he says, "or I would have freaked out." Lepore communicated with him initially through a code of eye blinks. She was spelled off by her family, and Greene's parents, Elizabeth and Richard Greene, a retired RCMP officer, who shuttled back and forth from their home in Nova Scotia.

Lepore, frustrated by "an extreme amount of doubt" from the medical establishment about Greene's prognosis, turned to alternative medicine. She's always believed in "the power of intention," that visualizing a result can often make it happen. She told a friend: "We've got to do something; we don't have a hope in hell here." The friend told her about a Vancouver-area distance healer, a young man who guards his real surname but calls himself Adam Dreamhealer. They went to his website, which includes advertisements for his books and workshops, and testimonials, including that of rocker Ronnie Hawkins, who credits Adam with helping him beat a terminal diagnosis of pancreatic cancer in 2003. Lepore wrote Adam an email, the subject line: "Canadian soldier injured in axe attack needs your help."

Adam, during an initial visit, saw in an unresponsive Greene "a white light. I don't know, I guess I could describe it as your connection to source, or God," says Lepore. "He could see that connections were there, there was still brain activity." His sessions, mostly done from afar, involve directing his energy. As he claims on his website, "with a focused intention to heal, and the power of energy,

we all have the ability to heal ourselves."

Adam conducted a series of "distant energy" treatments, he told *Maclean's*. Lepore, who was with Greene in the intensive care unit, says "things seemed to be going on at the exact time of Adam's treatments, like eyes opening and closing, body movements, eyes moving." He performed a second treatment after doctors warned they might have to remove one of Greene's lungs. "The following day doctors then decided they didn't have to remove a lung," Adam says. "I continued with occasional treatments and told Debbie that improvements would continue, but slowly." Lepore credits Adam with a role

its powers of adaptability and recovery. Dr. Shaun Gray, department chief of the rehabilitation centre in Ponoka where Greene spent 14 months, puts it this way: "We used to think of the brain as an organ that didn't really heal. The presumption was always if part of the brain was damaged that those neurons didn't regrow. It was like plucking a chip out of your computer—the functions of that chip were now gone and that was all there was to it," he says. While he wouldn't comment on Greene's specific case, he says the evidence now shows that with proper rehabilitation, and especially with a motivated, high-functioning individual, the brain can regenerate

**'MY LIFE** expanded,' he says of Grace's birth, before he received orders to deploy



in Greene's early path to recovery.

The couple has since employed many alternative therapies to complement medical care and established rehabilitation techniques. Among them: acupuncture, and reducing stress by manipulating the body's energy through reiki and craniosacral therapy. "The philosophy is when you go through a trauma like that it gets trapped in your body," she explains. "They have training to work with the fascia of the body to release those energy blockages."

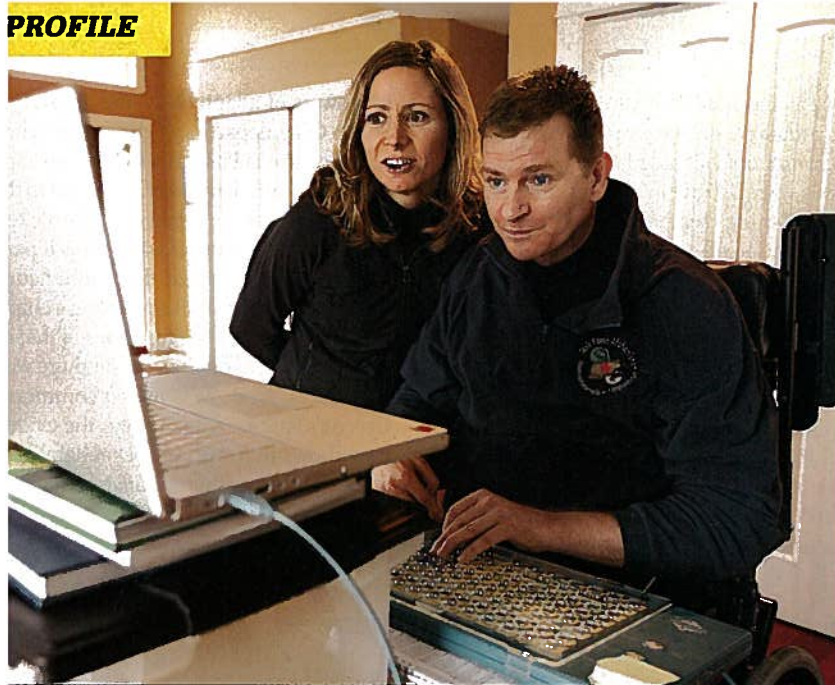
Such techniques, she knows, don't sit well with the medical establishment. She kept doctors on "a need-to-know basis," she says. "What's the expression—act now, ask for forgiveness later?" Adds Greene: "Forgiveness is easier to get than permission."

The medical establishment itself has gone through a major rethink about the brain, and

and rewire itself. "So, when a part that is responsible for a particular function is damaged, that capacity can be shifted to other parts of the brain."

Greene insists that during his rehab in Ponoka he could sense his brain was healing and compensating. "I've even felt it when I was studying Spanish online," he says. "I felt the neurons growing in my brain. It felt like a caterpillar crawling across the top of my skull." The actual limits of a brain's ability to recover are among the great unanswered questions, Gray says. "There are neuroscientists who suggest that we don't have the brain capacity to understand our own brains."

Greene doesn't know much about his attacker or his motivation, beyond news reports and the accounts of his platoon. "I know what his axe felt like on my head," he



**THREE** years ago he wrote his 'last letter' to Lepore: 'Mourn me and move on'

s. There are reports he was a deranged individual with no affiliation to the Taliban. platoon mates, however, who were fired immediately after the attack from positions across the river, call it an ambush. "I don't understand why he did it," says Greene. "I assume he was just an uneducated peasant, young to boot, who fell under the sway of the Taliban, who are corrupting the word of their Quran. The Quran is all about compassion, mercy and integrity."

here is a part of *Peace Warrior*, early in rehabilitation in Ponoka, where Ridout asks Greene what he dreams about. Afghanistan, the village meeting, and his assailant, replies. "We are friends." The answer reminded Ridout and the film crew. "It was moving. It was very unexpected," Ridout says. Asked today if he has forgiven his attacker, Greene stares out the window. "To move on and to forgive him," he says. "It was self-observation." Later he returns to the subject, as engaged with the elders. He saw me as a Canadian spokesman and I was his target. "I didn't know me. I didn't know him. No personal there."

here are emotional as well as physical effects to Greene's healing. His sporadic fits of depression, which only lifted this February, were compounded by post-traumatic stress, or what the military now calls "traumatic stress injury" (OSI). He could not watch anything about Afghanistan on television, nor could he handle the sight of military uniforms. He describes a visit by a lieutenant led by his commanding officer. They wore uniforms because they thought I would be comfortable," he says. "I was terrified." He took anti-anxiety medication and

worked with a psychologist at the centre, as well as a new OSI unit created under former chief of defence staff Gen. Rick Hillier.

Both Greene and Lepore say they've had exceptional support from the Canadian Forces. Last Christmas in Ponoka they were given a specially equipped van that was jointly paid for by the Department of National Defence and the Military Casualty Support Foundation (MCFS), a new charity for injured veterans started by Ontario-based military contractor IMT. The van was the charity's first major donation, says Theresa Hacking, the founder and president of MCFS. "I was really happy we could do that," she says, "it makes such a difference in their lives."

Financing from DND and from a trust fund created by Greene's legion of friends has helped convert their Nanaimo home into a rehab centre. Technicians created what is essentially an elevated railroad, a lift that starts above their bed and can carry Greene right into the bath. A second hoist can move him from his easy chair into a wheelchair. His latest project, in fact, is gaining the ability to use a standard arm-propelled wheelchair, something that would have been unthinkable even a few months ago.

Much of the credit goes to Lepore, his drill sergeant, who helped convert the family gar-

age into a gymnasium where Greene begins each day. There are weights, and a series of rubber bands hanging from the ceiling. Two wooden poles—equipped for traction at one end with a pair of Grace's rubber boots—are used to work his shoulders and arms, as is a bicycle-style hand crank. He wears for his workout the pair of military-issue black gloves he had in Afghanistan. Look closely and you notice the index finger on the right glove is cut away—his trigger finger.

That afternoon includes a tough session with occupational therapist Lila Mandziuk, assisted by Lepore and her stepfather, Bill Inglis. "This guy just doesn't quit," Inglis says in a quiet aside. "This lady," he says of Lepore, "has said, 'The word quit doesn't exist in our household.'" Greene is straining with an eight-pound dumbbell, additional weights strapped on his wrists. How does this compare to basic training, he is asked. "Easier," he grunts. Mandziuk's hands go to her hips. "I'm not impressed with that statement," she says. "After Christmas, the honeymoon is over."

**This holiday**, the first in their new home, is the brightest in a good long while. It will be marked here with a Christmas Eve celebration with much of Lepore's family, who live nearby. Greene is looking ahead to the completion of their book and a possible career as a motivational speaker. He's got other priorities, too. To get out of that chair. To get married. "To be a whole father for Grace, and a whole husband for Debbie, and to have more babies."

It was less than three years ago that Greene wrote his "last letter" to Lepore. It went something like this: "Mourn me and move on. Don't shackle yourself to a dead man. I died performing a mission I was proud of." It was just 2½ years ago that a doctor quietly advised Lepore to place Greene in a long-term care facility so he, and she, could get on with their lives. And it was a bleak day in Ponoka a year ago when he wondered aloud if he wasn't supposed to be dead.

Capt. Greene has come to realize a few things since then, now that the black dog of depression has slunk away and his arms can reach for the future. He didn't die, quite simply, because he was meant to live. And the soldier's mate didn't move on—and this he never doubted—because she isn't one for running away. ■



**FORGET THE 1/4-POUNDER, TRY A 20-POUNDER**  
A Pennsylvania chef has earned the admiration of gluttons around the globe for being the first ever to finish a Beer Barrel Belly Bruiser. This meat monstrosity includes a 15-pound patty, buns, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, onions, peppers, and a full cup—each—of mayonnaise, ketchup, mustard, and relish. Altogether, the burger weighs 20.2 pounds. Brad Sciuillo took four hours and 39 minutes to eat it, winning \$400 and three T-shirts for his efforts.