

## The Heart of a Hero Beats On

'The Worst Thing That Could Happen' Becomes Another's Chance to Live

BY MARK BERMAN – WASHINGTON POST STAFF WRITER SATURDAY, AUGUST 8, 2009

*Cpl. Benjamin Kopp gave his life. And then he saved one.*

An Army Ranger who had been on his third tour of duty, Kopp was buried Friday at Arlington National Cemetery. Sadly, it's a familiar story: a young man dead before his time, shot by unnamed enemies on the other side of the world.

But this time, there was a renewed life, too. Kopp wanted to be an organ donor. And after he died, his heart was transplanted into a family member's friend who had a rare form of congenital heart disease.

"How can you have a better heart?" said a grateful Judy Meikle, 57, of Winnetka, Ill., who is still recovering from the surgery. "I have the heart of a 21-year-old Army Ranger war hero beating in me."

Kopp's mother, Jill Stephenson of Rosemount, Minn., said that in addition to her son's heart, doctors removed his kidneys, pancreas and liver for transplant.

"It helps my sorrow; it eases my pain. It really does," Stephenson said. "I know that Ben wanted to help save lives . . . and it really prolongs Ben's life and honors his memory so much and honors me in that we could save other lives."

Kopp had served two tours of duty in Iraq when he left this spring for Afghanistan. On July 10, his unit attacked a Taliban safe haven in Helmand province, according to the 75th Ranger Regiment. The fight lasted several hours, resulting in the deaths of more than 10 Taliban fighters, but Kopp was shot in the leg.

He was flown to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany before being transferred to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in the District.

"Initially, it was really comforting to have him be there" on U.S. soil, Stephenson said. "And then it was tough to see him in that condition. . . He looked like a big strong guy. But he was full of tubes and cords and wires."

The doctors at Walter Reed raised the possibility of organ donation with Stephenson, but she said there was never much question that it would happen. Kopp had talked about it and indicated his preference both on his driver's license and in his living will with the Rangers. And organ donation wasn't something new for the family.

"I lost a brother 27 years ago. He was only 11, and our family donated his organs," Stephenson said. "And I had that sitting in my heart all these years."

On July 18, Stephenson posted an online journal entry telling family and friends about Kopp's passing and said that they were going to donate his organs.

Maria Burud, Stephenson's first cousin in Chicago, had been following Kopp's condition on the Web site. What occurred next was happenstance.

Burud and Meikle are friends who had worked together in the 1980s. Burud knew that Meikle needed a heart transplant, and Stephenson happened to see her cousin's message in time.

Stephenson had been told that the family could designate an organ recipient if the person was eligible for a transplant. At the time, Stephenson didn't think she knew anyone on the eligibility list.

"It's a pretty unusual coincidence that somebody knows somebody who needs a heart," said Dr. Michael Shapiro, chair of the Organ Transplantation Network/United Network for Organ Sharing ethics committee.

Meikle knew it might not work out, that Kopp's heart might not be a match. "It's a million-to-one shot," she said. It had taken her seven months to get on the eligibility list because she needed to build up a tolerance for heparin, a drug used to prevent blood clots during heart surgery. But she got a call later that day from Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

In the early hours of July 20 -- two days after Kopp died -- Meikle had her transplant surgery at Northwestern. She is resting at home in Winnetka, a Chicago suburb. She was on the heart transplant waiting list for 77 days, less than a third of the national average time. (Across the country there were 2,861 candidates on the waiting list for a heart transplant as of July 31, the latest data available from the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network.)

"Ben and Jill were so courageous that something good came out of something that was the worst thing that could happen to someone," Meikle said. "I'm just the luckiest woman alive."

At Arlington on Friday, Kopp's friends and family gathered on the southern side of Section 60, where many of the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan are buried. Among the mourners were Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Secretary of the Army Pete Geren and Minnesota Sen. Al Franken (D), who is from St. Louis Park, the same town as Kopp's mother.

Kopp's mother and father, Duane Kopp, were handed folded flags. Stephenson clutched her flag as her boyfriend, Pat Vos, tried to console her. Kopp's father slowly ran his hands over the blue material dotted with white stars.

Several Rangers from Kopp's unit had come up from Fort Benning on Thursday. "They're Ben's brothers. Those are his brothers-in-arms, and those guys are all very shook up about losing Ben," Stephenson said. "They've all sworn that I've gained them as sons now."

As the funeral ended, they lined up to greet their comrade's parents, a series of uniformed men in tan berets, bowing as they offered hands and hugs from aching hearts.