Army picks up tab for million dollar baby

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"The doctors said that she would not be able to sustain life on her own after birth," Spc. Clay R. Weaver, Special Troops Battalion, Multi-National Corps-Iraq said. "My wife and I were devastated and they said that they could perform an abortion. That was out of the question. We agreed that we would do anything we could to help Aili fight the odds."

While most I Corps Soldiers were tying up loose ends before their deployment to Iraq earlier this year, Weaver was thinking about not deploying at all. His daughter, Aili, had been born with Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome, where the heart's left side is underdeveloped and is usually fatal within the first few days or month of life unless treated.

Twelve doctors were present on Nov. 25, when Aili was born. Six for her and six for her mother. Weaver said he had barely cut the umbilical cord when she was whisked away by the doctors.

"She had her first open heart surgery right after birth. It was to bypass the heart all together by being attached to a machine that performs the functions of the heart and lungs," he recalled.

"To see your new baby with her chest left open and machines keeping her alive is something that I would not even wish upon my enemy. You just have to remember that underneath all the med equipment that there is your precious child."

At the hospital, they started calling Aili the million dollar baby, Weaver said. At first he thought it was because the defect was one in a million. Turned out it was because the bill was well over a million dollars. The second surgery was a little less, fortunately the military covered the cost.

"She will never be an athlete and her immune system is weak. Her life expectancy is unknown," Weaver said.

Being torn between family and soldierly responsibilities is never easy.

"My wife and I talked about me staying back," the 28-year-old father of three said.

"But we only have nine people in my section. It would have been a huge loss."

"After seeing that baby with a tube sticking out of her, you think that if ever there was a Soldier that should stay back, it was him," Command Sgt. Maj. Elmo L. Leichenauer, ,Special Troops Battalion, Multi-National Corps-Iraq, said.

"He wanted to be a soldier," he added. "By him being here and his ability to perform his mission, it reflects directly on him."

Weaver was struck by the outcome of support for his family.

"The C-7 section's Family Readiness Group was very involved," Leichenauer said.

The wives discussed the issue and started cooking the meals for Weaver's family. They would then drive an hour and a half from Fort Lewis to Seattle Children's Hospital to deliver them, he added.

"Everyone in my unit did a lot to help out," Weaver said. "They brought us cooked food, gift certificates. Anything I needed, they were willing to help out with."

Weaver and his wife, Kiersten, came to an agreement that would let a Soldier be a family man as well.

"We agreed that I could go as long as I could come home on leave for the second surgery," Weaver said. "My command was very instrumental in making that happen."

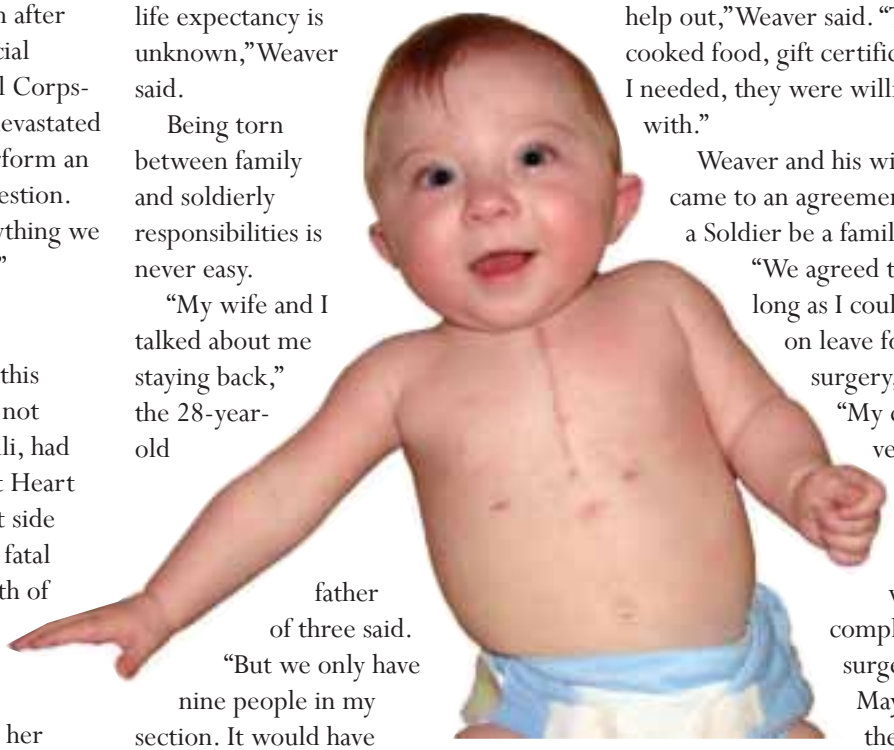
When Aili went in for a complete open heart surgery at the end of May, her dad was there.

"The surgery went fine," Weaver said.

"It was so successful that the doctors were amazed at Aili's recovery," he added. "Within a week she was on her way home. The doctors didn't think that was possible."

Presently Alili is home with her mother, continuing to heal and grow. She will have monthly check ups and another surgery when she is 3 or 4 years old.

"She's really small because she has been healing since birth, but she's still crawling around getting, getting into stuff, doing all the things babies do," Weaver said. "I am forever in debt to all those who helped my family and could never repay them for their time and prayers."



Courtesy photo

Aili Weaver smiles at the camera with her scar from open heart surgery. She was born with Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome.