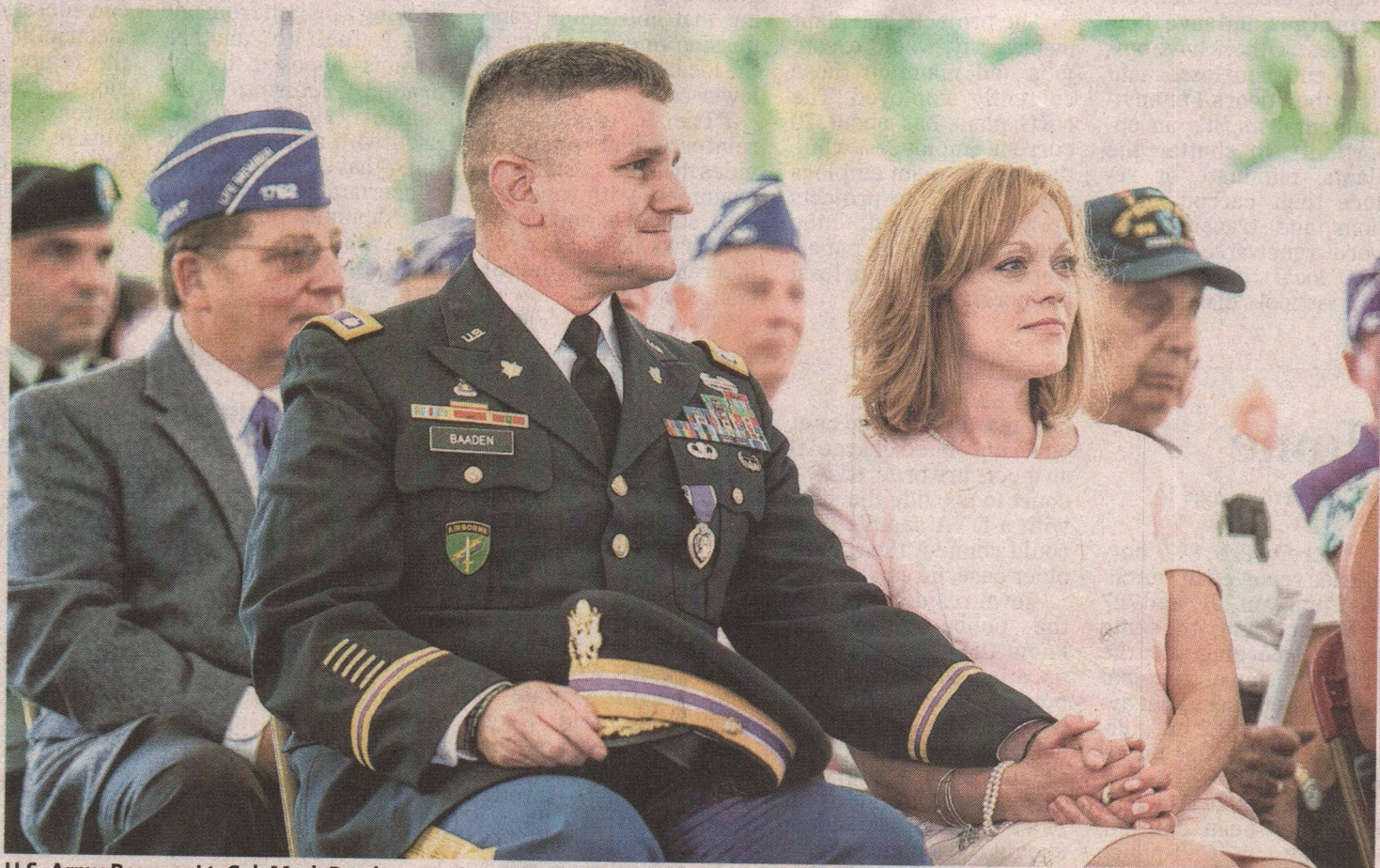


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U.S. Army Reserve Lt. Col. Mark Baaden, 41, sits with his wife, Selena Baaden, 38, both of Hopewell Junction, after being presented with a Purple Heart on Sunday at the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor in New Windsor. RYAN PARAGGIO/FOR THE POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

# U.S. ARMY OFFICER GETS PURPLE HEART

## Iraqi attack caused traumatic brain injury, partial memory loss

By **Nina Schutzman**  
Poughkeepsie Journal

**NEW WINDSOR** — There are moments in his life that Army Lt. Col. Mark Baaden doesn't remember now, following the Dec. 11, 2003, traumatic brain injury he suffered when a suicide car bomber attacked the Ramadi, Iraq, camp he was stationed in for his first deployment.

"The driver drove up by a group of us," the Hopewell Junction resident said. "I think the car was rigged with about 150 pounds of explosives and artillery rounds hidden in the car."

Baaden remembers the moments leading up to the attack.

"He was in a blue pickup. ... I remember every dent and scratch," Baaden said of the bomber. "He actually waved and smiled, which I'll never forget. He looked right at me."

But parts of his wedding day, his children being born, other events in his life,



From left are Purple Heart recipients Richard Drago, 64, of Newburgh; Frank Volock, 84, of Goshen; and James Nasso, 88, of Brooklyn. RYAN PARAGGIO/FOR THE POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

### VIDEO

Visit [www.poughkeepsiejournal.com](http://www.poughkeepsiejournal.com) to see Lt. Col. Mark Baaden receive his Purple Heart and talk about his experiences.

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# Honor

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both big and small — he has trouble remembering if they happened before the attack.

“Some of it’s starting to come back now, but it’s the details of a lot of things, milestones, I just don’t remember,” Baaden said.

On Sunday, with his proud family watching — his wife of 16 years, Selena, 15-year-old daughter Samantha, 11-year-old son Michael and his father, Richard, a veteran — Baaden experienced a new milestone he’ll never have trouble remembering.

Baaden was awarded the Purple Heart.

The Purple Heart is an award of honor, given to those injured in combat, said Peter Bedrossian, program director of the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor, where Baaden was presented with the award.

Baaden’s award presentation coincided with Purple Heart Appreciation Day, the 231st anniversary of the creation of the Badge of Military Merit, the inspiration for the Purple Heart.

In 1782, while staying in his Newburgh headquarters, Gen. George Washington decided to create the award in order to “improve their (soldiers’) condition and mo-

rale,” according to purpleheart.org.

In 1932, the Purple Heart medal became the official “successor decoration” to the Badge of Military Merit.

It’s impossible to get exact records of the number of people who have been awarded a Purple Heart, Bedrossian said.

“No one keeps a master list,” he said. “Since 1932, it’s estimated that between 1.7 (million) to 1.8 million people have been given the award, but we have on record 189,350 people.”

On Tuesday, Dutchess County will be designated as a Purple Heart County by Legislature Chairman Robert Rolison “in recognition of the men and women who have selflessly served their country and this community in the Armed Forces,” according to a press release.

Gen. Dwayne Edwards awarded Baaden his Purple Heart, which was actually granted to him on April 22.

Memories of why he’s been given the highly respected military award are still clear, despite his injuries.

Baaden remembers the suicide bomber well.

“He drove by us and looped back around,” Baaden said. “What I think he was looking for was a (large group) of soldiers.”

Baaden said 11 other soldiers were injured in the attack. A 13th soldier,



Army Reserve Lt. Col. Mark Baaden, 41, addresses the Sunday crowd after receiving his Purple Heart. RYAN PARAGGIO/FOR THE POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

Spc. Marshall Edgerton, whom Baaden refers to as a hero, was killed.

“He (the suicide bomber) stopped the car, so we got alerted,” Baaden continued. “He was monkeying with something. ... Marshall leveled his weapon at him while he was trying to ... set the bomb off because he was making us all nervous.

“Marshall told us to get back and as we started to go back, I remember a pop ... hot wind ... and that’s pretty much it,” Baaden said.

The truck exploded while it was parked, he said.

Baaden was “thrown through the air and knocked down, and woke up in a (makeshift) clinic,” he said. He woke up

about an hour later, feeling like he was “underwater.”

“I was knocked unconscious, broken jaw, teeth ... I was very lucky,” he said.

He also felt like he was “waking up from a nightmare.”

“I was panicked and agitated,” Baaden said. “I couldn’t hear good ... I had lost hearing, I’m half deaf (in one ear).”

Baaden left the clinic, got his rifle and guarded a chaplain as he administered comfort and last rites. Chaplains don’t carry firearms.

Baaden didn’t leave the military after his injury. He finished that tour, served for rescue operations in New Orleans following Hurricane Katri-

*“It’s a fraternity and a brotherhood. There’s no greater honor than to wear this uniform.”*

**LT. COL. MARK BAADEN,**  
U.S. Army Reserves

na, completed another tour in Iraq from 2007 to 2009 and one in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2012.

He’s currently battalion commander in the U.S. Army Reserves of the 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion in Mattydale, Onondaga County, according to a press release for the event.

Baaden said his life is busy and fulfilled.

Along with the military and time with his family, he is a New York State Police sergeant in the Wappinger barracks and he is going back to school for a second master’s degree — the first was for criminal justice; this one is for public administration.

In 2011, traumatic brain injuries, or TBIs, made “many veterans” eligible for Purple Hearts, Baaden said.

“Back in 2003, the ‘TBIs’ weren’t as studied as they are now. ... In 2011 they gave retroactive Purple Hearts for that kind of wound,” Baaden said. “I’m working with (Veterans Affairs) and they’ve

been just tremendous. They have me do a lot of memory exercises.”

He also credits his “awesome” wife, who goes through photo albums with him to help him remember.

For her part, Selena Baaden said she doesn’t mind her husband’s memory loss. It’s enough for her to know that he was at the events, and that he loves her and their children.

“I love him so much,” she said.

The pride she felt as she watched his Purple Heart presentation was matched with a feeling of happiness that others in his situation could come together and support each other.

“It’s really important for them (soldiers and veterans) to be able to gain strength from each other,” she said.

Not many soldiers get to receive the award in front of their families.

Bedrossian referred to the presentation and award as an “enduring message of hope.”

Mark Baaden agreed. “These grounds are absolutely sacred,” Baaden said. “It’s a fraternity and a brotherhood. There’s no greater honor than to wear this uniform.”

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