

Pictured left to right: Alan & Malia Sharkey, Flight Nurse April Botts, and little Edwin.



# A Joyous Occasion

## ... and an Unexpected Crisis *By: Laura Kaufman*

**AIR -TRAFFIC CONTROLLER MALIA SHARKEY AND HER HUSBAND, ALAN WONG, A LICENSED PARAMEDIC AND FIREFIGHTER, WERE EXCITED ABOUT THE APPROACHING DELIVERY OF THEIR FIRST CHILD.**

When Malia started to go into labor on the afternoon of September 3, 2015, Alan immediately called his employer, AMR, to say he needed a substitute for his shift. The couple swiftly headed for the regional hospital in Lompoc.

Little did Alan know that he would meet his substitute, late that night, during his family's own emergency.

Things progressed in the delivery room, and at 11:49 p.m., Malia and Alan welcomed a healthy little boy, Edwin, with delight. But suddenly, according to Malia, everything changed for her. "That's when the bleeding started," she says. And it would not stop. "Our doctor got the OR opened. Nurses put in extra IV lines. The doctor was calm, which was my first sign that things were not good. Then, my husband—normally a calm person—was yelling, and that's when I knew it was bad. My memory stops there. I was wheeled out, and into surgery."

Malia eventually needed 14 units of blood at Lompoc Hospital. She had developed a dangerous condition called

Disseminated Intravascular Coagulation (DIC), which caused her blood to stop coagulating, making her situation more serious.

Alan recalls, "After about three hours, the doctor came back and told me face-to-face that he was not sure if my wife would make it. "

The physician knew he did not have enough resources to treat her. CALSTAR was called in the early morning hours for an emergency transfer to the nearest Level II Trauma Center—Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital.

The CALSTAR team met Alan and Malia (who was unconscious) in the ICU. She had multiple intravenous lines and was intubated. The team had to take her via AMR ambulance (with Alan's replacement on the night shift) to the airport for the flight. After 30 minutes in the air, Malia arrived at Cottage and was admitted to the E.R. Alan stayed in Lompoc temporarily with his infant son.

CALSTAR Flight Nurses Josh Henke and April Botts were on duty that night. Alan recalls, "April called to let me know when Malia was stable at Cottage and that they were starting to work on her."

"I thought I'd dreamt about helicopter blade noise, but that's all I remember," Malia says.

Luckily, Alan's mother was visiting in Lompoc and was able to stay with the baby while Alan raced to the trauma center. "At first, the scene around Malia was straight out of a TV show," he says. "There were five nurses in the suite, IV pumps going, a tube in her throat, and she was unconscious. She seemed like someone I would have treated from a serious car accident." Malia ended up needing 16 additional units of blood at Cottage Hospital.

After many hours, Malia was moved to the ICU. And there, things finally started to turn around. "I knew she was on her way to getting better," says Alan. "The next day, she started to open her eyes, and could communicate. Although she could not speak due to the tube, she could write on paper."

"I was told I wrote funny things to people, although I don't even remember them being there," Malia recalls. "I did remember that the baby was born, and every time I got lucid, everyone told me that he was just fine."

Malia was at Cottage for about a week and a half. She returned home, weak and low on endurance, and slowly began to return to a more normal existence. "When I first got home, I felt so many emotions all at once," she relates. "I was so happy to hold my baby, and was also very sad that I missed out on his 'first' of many things already."

"We were so fortunate to have a lot of family and friends helping out," she continues. "It really was difficult for me to do anything, especially when I was in the hospital. When I was discharged, I was still very weak. Overall, it was pretty miraculous to be doing so well. My parents said their real Christmas present was me surviving," she adds.

A few weeks after Malia came home, she was able to leave the house for short periods. One local event she attended with little Edwin was a community safety day in which the police, sheriff, and volunteer fire departments had set up displays and activities for kids in a local park. "CALSTAR was there, and since I was there with the baby to visit my husband's fire department crew, I said 'Let's go say hello and see if they know the flight team who worked that night, maybe we could thank them.'"

They walked over—and there was April! "She remembered me—although I looked completely different," says Malia. "She and a bunch of the crew members had been worried about me. She was so glad to see me walking around!"

"I just wanted to thank the entire crew who worked on me that night, because I am sure I would not be here if not for them," Malia says.

Malia has now been able to return to work part-time as an air traffic controller for the FAA. She is also in the Air Force Reserves. As a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, she has a realistic and matter-of-fact outlook, as well as "a Type-A personality," she says. She has been frustrated by her prolonged recovery, but her baby son is a very bright point in her life as she recovers.

Malia recently visited the local CALSTAR base, and brought some goodies to the staff. "My dad is a pilot, and I do air traffic control, so I know how much goes into maintaining the aviation side of things. An air transport, like mine, is not activated unless there is no other option. An ambulance running with lights and a siren was not fast enough in my case. In retrospect, that's pretty scary to me," she says.

Alan adds, "I've worked in the field for a long time, and know about the 'Golden Hour'—the hour in which you have to get critical patients to the operating room. The situation was similar for us. If CALSTAR had not been there to transport my wife, she would not have gotten the care she received and would not be here with us today. CALSTAR staff members were extremely professional, really compassionate, and committed to providing my wife with the best care."

"As flight nurses, we rarely get to know the outcome of the patients we fly," adds Flight Nurse April Botts, "and it is even rarer to actually meet them in person. Seeing Malia and her family at the local safety event was absolutely the highlight of my day. Malia was so sick that my partner Josh and I were surprised she survived.

To see her and her beautiful baby, healthy and happy, was such a heartwarming feeling. She was so grateful for our care. It really makes me proud of my profession and brings home that old cliché, 'that's why we do what we do.' I helped save a life, and I made a friend. It just doesn't get any better than that."

What is in the future for the young family? "We really hope that in this next year, we will be a normal, healthy family. On Edwin's first birthday in September, I want to put together a blood drive," says Malia. "Besides CALSTAR, the other effort that helped save my life was made by many blood donors. I want to put together family and friends on that day as a commemoration of that help. The Blood Bank of the Central Coast has a campaign on Facebook to encourage blood donors during this time of year. During cold and flu season, there are fewer donors."

According to Alan, the experience he and Malia lived through has made a difference in his work. "It has made me even more compassionate and understanding toward the people I see and treat every day," he reflects.

Malia adds, "The experience also brought me closer to my family. My entire family rallied around my husband and me when we needed them. They never wavered. It also makes you appreciate how fragile life can be. You can do everything to make a pregnancy turn out the right way with prenatal care, and other precautions. You don't think about the serious things that could happen. Yet, they happened to me. The experience definitely makes me appreciate everyone around me more." ✨

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