

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 16, 1974

BILL ATKINSON

AT THE AUGUSTINIAN seminary in New Hamburg, N. Y., just above West Point on the Hudson River, there is a dandy quarter-mile hill that the young seminarians use for a bobsled run when it snows.

Almost nine years ago, William Edward Atkinson, just turned 19, was riding in front of a bobsled at the seminary as it hurtled downhill. Three fellow seminarians were behind him, laughing heartily as they enjoyed a rare break in the routine of life in the novitiate.

Near the bottom of the hill, some of the powdery snow blew into Atkinson's face. For a moment, the husky, robust youth from the Bywood section of Upper Darby was blinded. In that split second, the bobsled slammed into a tree and the life of Bill Atkinson and everyone who knew him was changed forever.

The force of the impact severed Atkinson's spinal cord at the neck. Doctors say his spine literally "exploded." They also said Bill should have been killed instantaneously.

He wasn't.

NOR DID HE DIE during the 45-minute trip in the back of a station wagon over unplowed roads to St. Francis Hospital in Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

He should have died, but he didn't.

And his dreams of ever becoming a priest should have been shattered. But they weren't.

The next six weeks still are like a dream to Bill Atkinson. Seated in his "take-it-easy" chair in the family living room at 409 Sansom St., Upper Darby, he said, "There were no nights and no days, no recollection of dates. Occasionally, I'd hear a snatch of conversation, but that was all."

Once, when he was delirious with a temperature of 108, he heard the nun and the doctor arguing. The room was like a refrigerator. Bill was wrapped in ice and a winter wind snapped curtains at the open window.

"Doctor, that boy is going to get pneumonia," a nurse pleaded.

"I can't cure pneumonia," the doctor snapped, "I can't cure a roasted turkey."

On several occasions, Atkinson's breathing

190 pounds to 89 pounds. He was more dead than alive. Every day he woke up was another chapter in a medical miracle . . . or a miracle of some type.

Eventually, miraculously, Atkinson gained sufficient strength to be transferred to Magee Hospital in Philadelphia to begin a torturous rehabilitation ordeal which continues to this day.

He has had a piece of bone from his hip fused into his neck so he can hold his head erect. You no longer can see where doctors performed a

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My kind
of town



tracheotomy or where traction bolts were screwed into his head.

What you can see is a good looking youth, ruggedly handsome, with stylishly cut blond hair, blue eyes and a smile that breaks out despite every effort by its owner to stop it.

ON FEB. 2, William Edward Atkinson, O.S.A., will be ordained a priest. A special dispensation from Pope Paul made it possible.

To the best of anyone's knowledge, he will be the first quadriplegic ever to be ordained in this country.

If William is impressed by this achievement, he doesn't show it.

"An Atkinson trait is not to show much on the outside," he explained, that shy grin once again spreading across his face.

"It all depends upon your point of view, I suppose, but what others have done is in the forefront of what I've done."

By "others," Atkinson means his fellow seminarians, his tutors at Villanova University, where he continued his studies for the priesthood, and his family.

The family includes his father Allen, a trolley operator for SEPTA on the 69th Street to Norristown run for 22 years; his sister Mrs. John

His ordination Feb. 2 will be the latest in a long line of miracles

PERHAPS THE MOST important member of the family won't be at St. Alice's Church when John Cardinal Krol, Archbishop of Philadelphia, ordains Atkinson.

Mary Atkinson, Bill's mother, passed away in November.

She had been at her son's side every minute he was in the hospital at Poughkeepsie. She was the one who whispered fiercely, "Breathe, Bill, breathe," at those terrible moments when his breathing stopped.

And she was at Magee Hospital one remarkable afternoon when suddenly, for a reason no one can explain, Atkinson shrugged his shoulders.

Using that tiny muscle twitch as a base, Atkinson has painstakingly developed those muscles until he now can get around in an electric-powered wheelchair. And using a small gas-powered, artificial "muscle," he can grip things — a pen or a pencil — and is able to use a typewriter.

WITH THE MENTAL and physical agony largely behind him, Atkinson should be feeling great.

"Not really," he explained. "Maybe 50 years from now, when I'm ready to cash it in for good, I'll feel great. But the ordination is only the beginning, the start of my career."

"The good feeling should be their's — my tutors, my family, the Augustinians. Without them, I couldn't have done it."

"Sure, I have my doubts . . . it's sort of like a man walking down the aisle to get married. "He's not 100 per cent certain. He has doubts but he also has hopes that if he gets in trouble, he'll get help."

"Well, I have those hopes also, that people will help me."

"Besides," he joked, "I can't change my mind now. The invitations already are out."

IT WAS TIME for Bill to be transferred from his easy chair to the wheelchair. His kid brother, a strapping youngster, and his Dad, a husky, greying man in his 50s, wearing his trolley operator's blue uniform, lifted him gently and expertly and strapped him in his chair.

A visitor wondered aloud if perhaps the joy of the ordination wouldn't be diminished just a little

