

# Paralyzed Seminarian Wins 'Good Fight' In Struggle To Become Augustinian

Villanova, Pa. (C) — In 1965 when Bill Atkinson's big brother Al was making his first bone-crushing tackles for the New York Jets, Bill lay in a hospital bed, paralyzed from the shoulders down.

It looked then that if there were going to be any heroics in the Atkinson family, they would have to come from Al, the Villanova University football hero who made it to big-time pro football.

For Bill, who a year earlier had entered the novitiate of the Augustinian order, it looked like the end of the line. If he lived, the best the doctors could promise him would be a life confined to a wheel chair as a quadriplegic.

Today, Bill Atkinson is still a quadriplegic, which means he has lost the natural use of his arms and legs. But through grueling therapy, special apparatus and a determination not to become a burden to others, he has more than just survived.

Next February, Atkinson will be ordained a priest in Philadelphia. The Augustinians had to get special permission from the Vatican and they finally received it. No one can say for sure, but it is believed that Atkinson will be the first in the United States, possibly in the world, to become a priest under such a handicap.

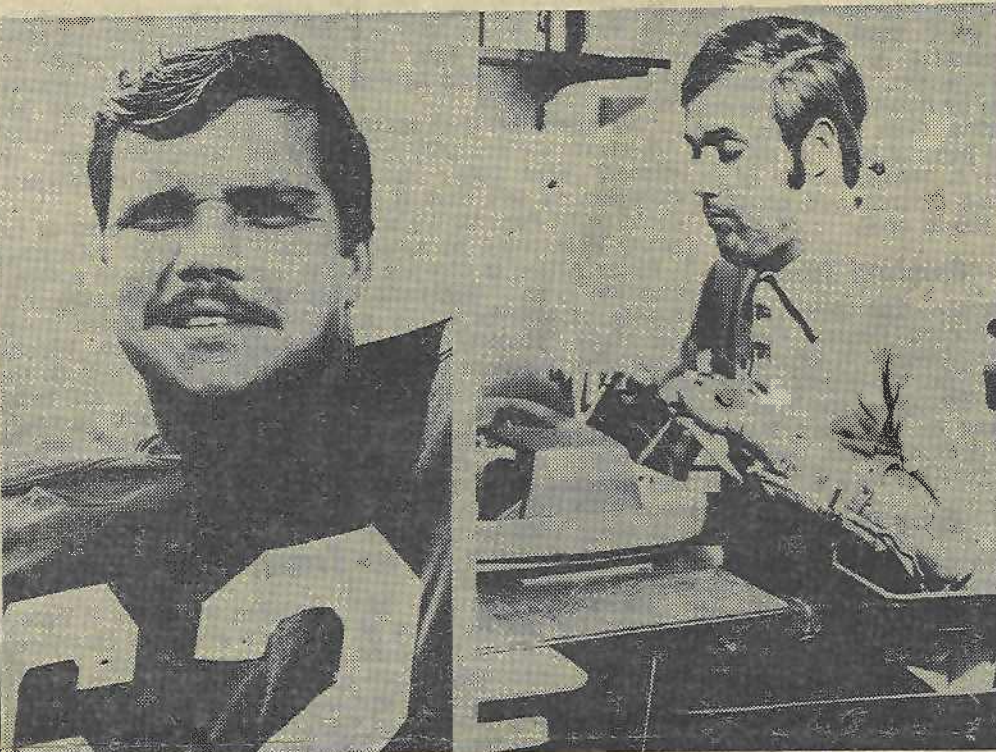
Bill, like his brother Al, was graduated from Villanova. He joined the Augustinian Novitiate at New Hamburg, N.Y., in 1964. Then a year later the tragedy struck.

Atkinson and three of his friends were tobogganing down a hill in New Hamburg when suddenly the toboggan began to go out of control. A heavy snow was blowing, making vision poor.

Young Atkinson decided to jump off the runaway toboggan. As he jumped, he hit a tree in such a way that it struck the back of his neck. He was rushed to St. Francis Hospital in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., completely paralyzed from the shoulders down.

His respiration had to be maintained through breathing devices. Bolts were screwed into his skull. The doctors were taking extraordinary means to keep him alive for six weeks. At one point, he contacted pneumonia. His breathing became so silent that one doctor, thinking Atkinson was dead, sadly said "That's it," and called the morgue.

Atkinson survived. Then came the plans to rehabilitate as best as possible Atkinson's paralyzed body. He



**BROTHERS ATKINSON**—While linebacker Al Atkinson (left) of the New York Jets has been fighting off blockers, his brother, Bill (right) has been struggling to become a priest despite being a quadriplegic. He may be the first person in the world to be ordained with such a handicap. The ceremony will be held in Philadelphia next February. Bill, typing with the eraser end of pencils in his room, has been studying at Villanova to become an Augustinian priest.

needed to be moved to the Magee Memorial hospital in Philadelphia, an institution renowned for treatment of disabled persons.

The fire engine company from his home town of Upper Darby, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia, sent an ambulance 150 miles up to Poughkeepsie to pick up Atkinson and bring him to Magee Hospital.

At Magee, Atkinson began to regain the use of his shoulder muscles. Meanwhile doctors gave Atkinson limited use of his arms by fashioning two devices. One is a brace which fits his forearm and is powered by carbon dioxide. This enables him to bring two fingers and his thumb together so that he can eat by himself. The other device allows him to hold a pencil. He cannot write with the pencil. But by holding the pencil, with the eraser pointing down, he can strike the keys of a typewriter.

But despite his stay of 16 months at the hospital Atkinson is still very much dependent upon others. To take care of his needs, the Augustinians sent six of its seminarians to Magee hospital where they were trained by specialists on how to take care of Atkinson. The seminarians in turn have trained other seminarians.

The superior of the Augustinian province of St. Thomas, Father Harry A. Cassel, wrote to the Vatican from Villanova to gain permission to have Atkinson receive Holy Orders. The request was granted recently.

Father Cassel said Atkin-

son's greatest desire is to be a hospital chaplain. "He sees his particular vocation of suffering as a great aid to his work in comforting the sick and bringing the peace of Jesus in their suffering," the superior said.

**Father Cassel said Atkinson will be able to celebrate Mass seated, and with some training he will be able to baptize, anoint the sick and hear confessions.**

Atkinson has had plenty of time to think about his own tragedy, but he doesn't spend time feeling sorry for himself. "In my short time in the hospital, and I consider 16 months a short time, I met very lonely people — people without hope. It is these people I would like to go back to and reassure them that somebody loves them and there is always hope."

Speaking about his own recovery, he said: "I could never have done it by myself. And so it goes. No one does it by themselves. It must be done with others."

Atkinson's brother Al, in nine years as a football professional, has become regular linebacker and a defensive

captain for the Jets. He stands at six-feet-two, and weighs 230 pounds.

The brothers are the sons of Mr. and Mrs. Allen Atkinson of Upper Darby. Their father is a motorman for the Red Arrow transit line in Philadelphia.