

## **Chance meeting with Jason Dunham leads to lifetime impact**

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By David C. Kniess, Jr.

A guest column

My wife and I, along with the baby, were headed east to Connecticut for the holidays. Our flight left LAX around midnight.

We settled into our seats, my wife and the baby on one side, and me on the other. I sat next to a young man with a high and tight. He couldn't have been more than 20. He was really young looking, reminded me of my kid brother.

We settled in and struck up a conversation. Me being ex-Navy, I was curious what branch he was -- but I already knew. He was a Marine, headed home to Upstate New York for Christmas leave.

"Where 'ya stationed?" I asked. "2-9," came the reply.

I knew what he meant. Twenty-nine Palms, hottest place on earth. He was a happy go lucky kid, joked around with the people around us, even made the baby laugh when she woke up.

The thing I remember about this kid was his smile, and his eyes. They were gentle, innocent, and maybe a little mischievous. Nonetheless he was a good kid with a great attitude.

We talked most of the trip, told me about the small town of Scio, and how he was looking forward to seeing his family. We talked about 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Marine Corps.

He even joked about the Navy -- I took it in stride.

The plane finally landed, I believe it was Pittsburgh, where my wife and I would catch our connecting flight to Hartford.

Before we departed the plane, I shook this kid's hand and told him to have a good trip. He smiled, waved at the baby and told me to take care. Something made me say "stay safe."

He smiled, kind of brushing it off like, "ain't no big deal," turned and left. On his way out, I could still hear him joking with the stewardess. I thought to myself,

'he's a happy goofy kid.'

I never saw him again. I imagined he'd gone home to see his folks, and then back to "2-9."

The war in Iraq started a few months later, and my thoughts turned to this kid.

I wondered how he was, or where he was for that matter. It's different when you're sitting at home, listening to the news, and watching the war unfold as you eat dinner.

But I stopped and said a prayer for this kid, and hoped he was somewhere safe. But he was a Marine, and probably in Iraq.

Tonight I was looking at a Web site that lists casualties in Iraq, and the words, Twenty-nine Palms, popped out at me. It said a Marine from Upstate New York, stationed at 29 Palms had died from wounds inflicted on April 14 in Iraq.

His name was Jason L. Dunham. I did a search and found the site below that shows his picture. It was the same Marine I sat with 16 months ago on that flight east.

He was the kid with the happy smile, and goofy jokes. I can't tell you how much it saddened me to have found that out tonight. I thought I'd share this with you. Think about Corporal Dunham, and the sacrifice he made.

I know I will. May God watch over you Corporal, Dunham.

Semper Fi and Anchors Aweigh "2-9."

(The writer is a producer and director for Zoiie Bean Pictures in California. This story was posted on the Khe Sanh vets website)