

A Mother's Road to Recovery

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Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet and philosopher from New England wrote, "Men are what their mothers made them." In the case of Marine Cpl. Jason Dunham of Scio, New York, these words ring with truth.

On April 14, the 22 year-old threw himself with his Kevlar helmet on a grenade in Karbala, Iraq. In a split second Dunham made the ultimate sacrifice, disregarding his own safety to save the lives of fellow Marines. One week later, the evening of April 21st, Dunham arrived at Bethesda from Germany. Dunham's condition had worsened after the transatlantic flight. Dunham's parents had arrived earlier that day in Bethesda to await the arrival of their critically injured son. At 4:43 pm of the following afternoon Dunham passed away.

As a result of the circumstances that preceded Dunham's death, the Marine from the 4th Platoon, K Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, I Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) has been nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor. There have been no other Marines from the Iraq war who have been nominated. The last time Medals of Honor were awarded was in 1993, for the heroic actions of two soldiers during the Blackhawk Down incident in Somalia. As for Dunham's mother, Debra Dunham, there is no doubt her son deserves special recognition. To the mother who raised him, his actions on April 14th were not unexpected.

"I wasn't surprised by his actions. It would be surprising if he did anything else. He always wanted to help other people. He is a hero to us no matter what happens. When our kids were born, they were heroes to us," said Dunham.

Even though Dunham may receive this country's highest recognition, a parent, especially one's mother, could still be understandably upset and disillusioned at the loss of a son in a foreign war. Dunham's mother however, chose another path. Just over two months have passed after her nightmarish ordeal, and the home economics teacher at Scio's Central High School has found a way to be thankful. "I was angry that he was hurt so badly. I didn't want him to die in Iraq. But the Marines brought him home to us," said Dunham in a phone interview from her home in Scio, a town of 1,900 in the western hills of New York's Allegany County.

As a mother, Dunham's greatest fear was that her critically injured son would be alone. More than anything else, she did not want her son to be fighting for his life

by himself.

"I did not want him to be alone. But I know the Marines never leave their own by themselves. There was always somebody with him. From a mother's point of view, I couldn't get to my son, but others were there to do the things that I couldn't do. That made things a lot easier for me. I don't know why, but it did," Dunham said. The Dunham family could not be with their son in the Iraqi or German hospital during that first week that Jason was struggling to remain alive. But Dunham could not help but feel that her son was still surrounded by family - the brotherhood of the Marines.

"The Marines always felt like family. When I lost my son, I was not put to drift. They were taking care of their brother," said Dunham's mother.

On holidays such as the 4th of July, Memorial Day and Veteran's Day, there are many mothers who are painfully reminded of the sacrifice that their children have made while serving in the armed forces of our country. On that fateful day in April, the Dunhams lost their oldest son. But, according to Dunham's mother, they gained much more.

"I lost my son, but I gained thousands," said the grief stricken, but proud mother of Dunham.

Emerson's words remind us that Jason Dunham's actions were not the result of mere chance. Dunham's actions in Karbala, Iraq were the result of a courageous Marine from a small town in New York who was raised to do the right thing.