

No Greater Love

By Michael M. Phillips

Published: May 29, 2005

The shadow of war never lifted during Marine Cpl. Jason L. Dunham's last Christmas at home.

The family trudged through the usual holiday routine in Scio, N.Y., a hamlet of 1900 residents. They shoveled a path to the barbecue and grilled steaks in the snow. Jason's mother Deb, a home economics teacher, then 43, hung the stockings cross-stitched with the children's names—Jason, Justin, Kyle and Katie.

Heading outside one day, Jason turned to his father Dan, 42, a factory worker, and announced that if he didn't make it home from Iraq, Dan should use the military insurance money to build a garage, put a porch on the house for Deb and send the kids to college. Then the 22-year-old told Dan that if his wounds left him incapacitated, he didn't want to live attached to a machine. "Dad," Jason said, "don't let me lie there for a day if I'm going to be that way forever."

In the evening, the family watched the movie *Black Hawk Down*. Jason, a 6-foot-1 former star athlete with a disarming grin, pointed out a machine gunner firing at swarms of Somali fighters. "That's what I do," he said.

Deb was appalled. "You have to tell them you need a different job."

"Why?" Jason asked.

"There's not enough protection," Deb insisted.

Jason laughed. "Mom, I can't do that."

Deb walked out, unable to watch more. At the doorway, she turned back to Jason and asked coldly, "You want your dress blues?"

"Yep."

"And you want a full military service?"

"Yep."

Nothing more was said. They both knew they were talking about Jason's funeral.

There are Marines who lead through intimidation. And there are Marines who lead through example. Corporal Dunham was the kind of infantry squad leader who picked up a shovel in the desert heat and helped the junior Marines fill sandbags at the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment's outpost on the Iraq-Syria border. He loaded his pack with spare batteries so none of his Marines would patrol without night-vision goggles. He jotted down tips in his notebook.

Enemy will withdraw unless 1st attack a success.
Don't sep. females from family.
Stay away from kangaroo rats.

Shortly after the 3rd Battalion made its way to Iraq early last year, Corporal Dunham extended his four-year enlistment so he could stay with his men through their entire combat tour. "I want to make sure everyone makes it home alive," he told a buddy. It was a decision he didn't share with Dan and Deb, to whom he wrote: "Don't worry too much, Mom. I'll be home as soon as the time's right. Love you all."

The top Marines in Kilo Company pegged Dunham as a born leader and put him in charge of a squad of frontline grunts, the guys who head toward the gunfire instead of away from it. So on April 14, 2004, during a patrol through Karabilah, Dunham's men clambered into their Humvees when they heard that insurgents had ambushed a Marine convoy.

Soon Dunham and six other men were zigzagging through a sun-baked stretch of walled compounds and rutted dirt streets, until they came upon a line of vehicles stopped on a dusty lane.

Dunham and PFC Kelly Miller, a 21-year-old from Eureka, Calif., charged up the lane to search a white Toyota Land Cruiser for weapons. The driver, a slender Iraqi man in a black track suit and loafers, leaped from the SUV, grabbed Dunham by the neck and cocked his arm to punch the corporal. Dunham caught the man's fist and drove a knee into his stomach. The Iraqi doubled over, and both men fell to the ground.

PFC Miller pulled out his telescoping police baton, snapping it down to extend it to its full length. The Iraqi was lying face-up, so Miller planted his knee in the man's ribs and twice slammed the butt of the baton into his forehead.

Lance Cpl. Bill Hampton, a big 22-year-old rifleman from Woodinville, Wash., raced toward the melee, his adrenaline surging. He aimed his rifle but worried that he might hit Miller. So Hampton decided to spear the man's head with his rifle barrel. He pulled his M-16 back to get some force behind it.

At that instant, Dunham apparently saw the Iraqi drop an armed hand grenade. “No, no, no!” Dunham yelled. “Watch his hand!” Hampton caught a fleeting glimpse of Dunham’s helmet on the ground.

Dunham was on his stomach, his arms wrapped around the sides of the helmet. Jason had evidently covered the grenade with his helmet to protect his Marines from the blast. The explosion shredded the helmet and peppered Miller and Hampton with shrapnel, wounding—but not killing—they. Dunham lay in a halo of his own blood, a metal fragment the size of a pencil eraser buried deep in his brain.

A week later, Deb and Dan Dunham arrived at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., hours before Jason was flown in from an Army hospital in Germany. He had been in a deep coma since the day he was wounded, able to breathe only with a machine. The Dunhams expected to spend months at Jason’s bedside. Deb brought a Harry Potter novel to read aloud to fill the long hours.

Instead, the next morning the Navy surgeons bluntly told Deb and Dan the damage to Jason’s brain was so severe that he would never know they were by his side. The doctors mentioned the unmentionable: They should consider removing Jason from life support. Deb and Dan held their son’s hands, then wandered the hospital grounds in shock. Dan, designated the decision-maker in Jason’s will, looked at Deb, tears streaming down his face. “I know how you feel about Jason,” he said. “I don’t want you to hate me. I need to know you’re with me.”

“I could never hate you,” Deb assured him. “I love you. We have to help him. He’s hurting. He trusts you. I support anything you want to do.” They had made their decision.

Word of Corporal Dunham’s fate reached Marine Corps Commandant Michael Hagee two hours before Jason was to be removed from life support. The 59-year-old general didn’t know that Corporal Dunham had sacrificed his life to save his men. He didn’t know that the corporal’s battalion commander would soon nominate Dunham for the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest military award, for bravery far beyond the call of duty.

The commandant had seen men die in combat and had comforted the parents of the wounded. Never before, however, had the general sat with parents who knew their son was about to die. He didn’t know what to say. He just knew he had to be with parents who had given so much.

General Hagee met the Dunhams in Jason’s hospital room, then called “Attention

to Orders,” and his aide read the citation for the Purple Heart, which has been given to military personnel wounded in combat since the times of George Washington.

Hagee clipped the purple ribbon to the pillow next to Jason’s bandaged head.

The general embraced Deb, who wept on his creased khaki uniform. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Marine commandant’s medallion. “This is a Marine coin,” he told her. “This is a part of Jason. I want you to have this to keep with you.”

Deb stuffed it into her pocket and told the general that her youngest son, Kyle, 15, wanted to be a Marine like his big brother. To Hagee’s amazement, the Dunhams said they would support him if that’s what Kyle really wanted.

Memorial Day in Scio, N.Y., is rich with small-town comforts. The Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts and T-ball players march with the school band to the cemetery. There are Popsicles and balloons, American flags and folding chairs, the volunteer fire department and the VFW. But this year feels different. Scio is still raw from the loss of its son. After the parade, the Dunhams will climb cemetery hill to a black headstone that reads “Jason L. Dunham, 1981-2004.” Next to Jason’s is an empty plot and a stone engraved with Dan’s and Deb’s names.

On Memorial Day, Dan will polish the granite. Deb will water the flowers. The Dunhams, the people of Scio and the Marines of Kilo Company will make sure that Jason is never forgotten. Dan and Deb will make sure he is never alone.