

How Do You Repay A Hero's Sacrifice?

Three years ago, a fellow Marine gave his life to save Kelly Miller. It has been a hard road since. Two mothers join forces.

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EUREKA, Calif. -- Kelly Miller has the dream once or twice a week.

He's on patrol in Iraq, searching a white Toyota Land Cruiser. The driver lunges out and grabs Cpl. Miller's squad leader, Jason Dunham, around the neck. The Iraqi and Cpl. Dunham tumble to the ground in a ferocious hand-to-hand struggle. Cpl. Miller beats the insurgent with a police baton. Another Marine races over to help. The Iraqi drops a hand grenade.

The force of the explosion lifts Cpl. Dunham into the air, his back arching before he falls back toward the brown-dirt road.

Cpl. Miller wakes up.

Almost three years have passed since that grenade exploded for real. But the images are never far from his mind -- the insurgent, the explosion and the friend who intentionally took the brunt of a live grenade and gave his own life to save Cpl. Miller's. The adrenalin of combat, the pain of hot shrapnel, the guilt of making it home alive.

At the White House on Thursday, President Bush will present Cpl. Dunham's parents with the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for military valor, the first such award for a Marine since Vietnam. The ceremony will enshrine Jason Dunham for posterity as one who loved his brothers more than himself.

In the audience will sit Cpl. Miller, a 23-year-old still struggling with what it means to receive that much love.

When American forces rolled into Baghdad in April 2003, Kelly Miller was living with his parents in Eureka in their modest shingled home, within sight of the smoky columns rising from the local paper mill. His mom, Linda, was an energetic doctor's-office manager with practical short hair. His dad, Charlie, was a quiet man who delivered mail for 31 years, then retired to care for his grandchildren.

Kelly Miller, sandy-brown-haired and six-foot-one, spent his days with friends, fishing for crabs and racing his car by the beach. On weekends he managed the night crew at the local supermarket.

But the news from Iraq made him wonder about his own courage. How would he perform in combat? One morning after his shift ended, he walked into the Marine recruiter's office at the strip mall and enlisted in the infantry.

So just after noon on April 14, 2004, he found himself a grunt in the Fourth Platoon of Kilo Co., Third Battalion, Seventh Marines -- and Cpl. Dunham's point man on a patrol through a trash-strewn Iraqi neighborhood near Karabilah, on the Syrian border.

HE WAS STILL what the Marines called a boot, a private first class fresh out of boot camp. Many senior enlisted men made life miserable for the boots. But Cpl. Dunham was different. When the boots had to fill sand bags in the hot sun, Cpl. Dunham filled sand bags beside them. Cpl. Miller and other boots loved him for it.

The insurgents had already gotten the jump on the patrol that day, firing a rocket-propelled grenade at the squad's Humvees. The grenade had missed its mark, and Cpl. Dunham's men climbed out of the vehicles to hunt down the shooter.

As point man, it was Cpl. Miller's job to spot roadside bombs and ambushes before it was too late. The responsibility weighed on him as he moved carefully past stone walls and silent, half-built homes. He worried that any mistake would get his friends killed.

The patrol stopped to search a line of vehicles that seemed to be fleeing. Cpl. Miller and Cpl. Dunham approached the white Land Cruiser, where Cpl. Miller saw a rifle poking out from under the rear floor mat. He looked up just in time to see the driver attack Cpl. Dunham.

The insurgent's hand grenade sprayed Cpl. Miller and Cpl. Bill Hampton, the other Marine who rushed to Cpl. Dunham's aid, with jagged pieces of metal. Cpl. Miller heard a ringing in his head, the echoes of a burst ear drum. His face flushed hot, and his mouth tasted of blood. A red stream dripped off his left hand, and he was confused to find that he couldn't pick up his rifle. Pieces of shrapnel burned in his face and arms.

"My mom is going to be ... pissed," he told another Marine as he wandered away from the scene, according to both men.

Despite the shrapnel that peppered Cpl. Hampton, he, too, was able to stagger away. But Cpl. Dunham lay still, a fragment embedded deep in his brain. He would die eight days later at a Naval hospital in Bethesda, Md., with his parents at his bedside.

Cpl. Dunham's commanders soon figured out that he had placed his helmet over the grenade to protect his friends, an act of bravery described in a front-page story in *The Wall Street Journal* on May 25, 2004.

The Marines sent Cpl. Miller to recuperate in Eureka, where he became withdrawn and quick to anger. He couldn't get it out of his head that, as point man, he was supposed to protect the Marines behind him. He was the first one to get to Cpl. Dunham's side, but instead of saving Jason, Jason saved him.

He had a tattoo artist ink a helmet-and-rifle memorial honoring Cpl. Dunham on his right arm with the words: Remember the Fallen 4-14-04. When he was well enough to play softball, Cpl. Miller taped his wrist to give him strength to swing the bat and wrote "Cpl. J.D. USMC" on the wrap.

"Mom, goddammit," he told Mrs. Miller after a couple of beers one night, "I should have done more to save Jason."

Mrs. Miller, now 59, became long-distance friends with Cpl. Dunham's mom, Deb, a 46-year-old with shoulder-length red hair. Mrs. Dunham taught home economics at the only school in tiny Scio, N.Y., patiently coaching students in such survival skills as child-care and bachelors' cooking. At home she baked pies, made fudge and did battle with three dogs.

When she first dated Dan Dunham, a farmhand, the locals thought them an unlikely pair. She was a self-described good girl; he took pride in being a hard-drinking bad boy who gave the local police headaches. He had already been married once and was raising two young boys, Jason and Justin, on his own on \$600 a month. She fell in love as much with the boys as she did with Dan, and ever after raised them as her own. The Dunhams had two more children together. For years, Mrs. Dunham couldn't rest until she knew all four children were safe in their beds.

Mrs. Dunham wasn't surprised that Jason had given his own life for his friends; she would have been surprised if he had done anything else under the circumstances. In a letter to Cpl. Hampton's mother, Mrs. Dunham wrote: "When you next get a chance to hug your son please give him one from me. He does not need to know it is from me, but I would appreciate if you would do that for me."

Far from begrudging Cpls. Miller and Hampton their survival, Mrs. Dunham felt that their lives added meaning to her own son's death. Soon Deb Dunham and Linda Miller began referring to Cpl. Miller as "our son."

"We believe that Kelly and William are both very special," Mrs. Dunham wrote to Mrs. Miller. "I do not know what is in their futures but I (we) firmly believe that Jason did what he had to do and they have some important purpose here and he has his to do in Heaven."

But for months Cpl. Miller couldn't get himself to talk to Jason's parents. When they finally met at the Marines' desert base in Twentynine Palms, Calif., Cpl. Miller spoke with them for 15 awkward minutes, unsure whether to thank them or apologize.

AS HE REGAINED STRENGTH and sensation in his arms, Cpl. Miller returned to Twentynine Palms obsessed with trying to rejoin his old platoon mates before they shipped out for their next tour of Iraq in the second half of 2005. It troubled him that his friends had finished their full seven months in the combat zone, while he had not.

Cpl. Miller's commander allowed him to resume light duty as Kilo Co.'s clerk, but even in Iraq that would be a rear-echelon job without the camaraderie of the front lines. So several times a day Cpl. Miller pestered the captain to allow him to rejoin Fourth Platoon as a rifleman, doing five quick pull-ups outside the office for emphasis.

The captain would allow Cpl. Miller back into a rifle platoon only with permission from his surgeon, his physical therapist, the battalion medical officer and his mother. Cpl. Miller collected the letters, including one from a very reluctant Mrs. Miller.

In March 2005, the captain cleared him to rejoin Fourth Platoon, and Cpl. Miller traveled home to Eureka to break the news. Mrs. Miller was in her room, folding clothes on the bed, when he told her that he would soon return to Iraq.

"Why do you feel you need to go back?" she asked him. "You don't have to."

"I have to finish something I started the first time," Cpl. Miller told her. He left the room, returning a few minutes later. "I have to go and finish what Dunham started, and bring my guys home," he said.

SOON ENOUGH, Cpl. Miller found himself in Ramadi, the most hostile city in the Sunni Triangle, for what proved to be months of grueling cat-and-mouse games with the insurgents. The Marines of Kilo Co. hid in abandoned buildings to ambush bomb makers. They manned an isolated, bomb-gutted outpost that was a frequent target for mortar and rocket attacks. They watched as Iraqis in civilian clothes casually dropped explosives on the main road through the city.

On three occasions Cpl. Miller called home from Iraq to report that he had been hurt. Once he injured his ankle playing basketball on base. Another time he stepped into a hole while on patrol. And another, his Humvee was destroyed by a roadside bomb. Each time he called, Mrs. Miller would report back to Mrs. Dunham, and they would fret together.

After he returned from Ramadi, Cpl. Miller decided he had had enough of the Marine Corps, and on his Web page he put a clock that counted down to the end of his enlistment in June, 2007. When the clock hit zero, he hoped to join his older brother as a sheriff's deputy back home in Eureka. He liked the idea of uniformed service, but without the long overseas deployments that made it hard to raise a family as a Marine.

Over the years, Cpl. Miller grew more comfortable around the Dunhams, and made a habit of calling Mrs. Dunham on holidays, such as Christmas and Mother's Day, when he knew that Jason would have called. They'd chat about his dating life and the doings of the Dunham family. He had long talks with Jason's younger brother and sister. Mrs. Dunham noticed the brotherly, teasing tone of their conversations, as if Kelly were trying to fill the gap left by Jason. He talked to Kyle, then 15, about the pros and cons of enlisting in the Marines, reminding him that going to college first would give him more options in life. Enlisting meant a four-year contract.

One night last summer, Mrs. Dunham hit a low spot, home alone and desperate to talk to Jason. In tears she phoned Cpl. Miller. He had friends over, but kept her talking until she was laughing again.

On his Web page, Cpl. Miller wrote, "Who I'd like to meet: The most Honorable Man I have ever had the privilege of meeting: Cpl. Jason Dunham. To have a chance to talk to him one more time would be priceless."

At the same time, Mrs. Miller felt that her son's personality had darkened. Her Kelly had been such a happy-go-lucky kid; now he seemed at ease only with other Marines or with two Eureka friends who served in the Army. His voice-mail message was a droning monotone: "You've reached Kelly. Whatever."

On his Web page, he posted a photo of himself in Ramadi, aiming a rifle at the photographer. He described his Nissan sports car and wrote: "I love to pitch it sideways or scream through a windy mountain pass."

One weekend last September, Cpl. Miller left base and drove to Eureka to see his girlfriend, Kellyn Griffin, a 21-year-old junior at Humboldt State University. On Saturday night, they went to the apartment of one of his Army buddies to play a movie-trivia game. Ms. Griffin drank rum and Cokes. Cpl. Miller drank Maker's Mark bourbon. They left just after midnight.

Cpl. Miller made it about a mile before he lost control of the Nissan and flipped it over at a "high rate of speed," according to the police report. The car took to the air, sheared off a wooden utility pole 20 feet above the street and came to a rest on the driver's side, crunched up like a paper napkin after a dinner party.

Ms. Griffin was found in a pool of blood fifty feet away from the Nissan, with a broken arm, a lacerated liver and a concussion that dulled her thinking for days.

Police found Cpl. Miller walking in circles in a nearby parking lot. When a state trooper interviewed him, the corporal volunteered that he "(messed) up and am screwed for drunk driving" and said he had to take responsibility for his mistake, according to the police report. The officer arrested him at 2 a.m. after a test that police say revealed a blood-alcohol level above the legal limit.

The crash broke Cpl. Miller's nose, a front tooth and his left shoulder blade and socket. At the hospital, Cpl. Miller was frantic for news of Ms. Griffin. Blood still covering his face, he found her hospital bed, felt his head spin and stumbled out of the room.

Cpl. Miller was released a few hours later. That night Mrs. Miller called Cpl. Dunham's mom. "Well, our boy did it," Mrs. Miller said.

A few days later, Mrs. Dunham called back and laid into Cpl. Miller. "You need to stop, Kelly," she recalls saying. "You need to learn to like yourself because Jason gave you a gift. Your mom and I can't lose anybody else."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Whether you do something spectacular or not, you still haven't completed your purpose in this life," she continued. "Whether it's you or your child or your great-great-grandchild who does something phenomenal, you have a purpose here, and your destiny isn't done yet."

Cpl. Miller was on heavy painkillers at the time and soon forgot the details of the conversation. But later he remembered how angry Jason's mother had been, and how ashamed he had felt.

The police charged Cpl. Miller with two drunk-driving felonies that carry a maximum combined penalty of six years in prison. A felony conviction would kill any chance of joining the sheriff's department.

Shortly after doctors removed the staples closing the wound on her back, Ms. Griffin and Cpl. Miller lay in bed in his childhood room. "I feel really bad, because in essence someone gave his life for me, and then I turned around and instead of making use of it, I quite possibly put it to waste," he told her.

Near the bed was a photo of Cpl. Miller in his dress blues and Purple Heart medal, a reminder of Cpl. Dunham's sacrifice. "I have to do good by more people and live up to the potential of both of us," Cpl. Miller told her.

THE CORPORAL'S FELLOW GRUNTS have rallied to his side. When Maj. Trent Gibson, commander of Kilo Co. when Cpl. Dunham was killed, heard about the car accident, he felt he had let Cpl. Miller down. Even though the major had changed jobs in the Marine Corps, he knew that Kelly had been having nightmares about the grenade attack. He knew Kelly had been getting reckless.

He wished he had said something earlier. Now, he emailed his men:

Kilo Brothers,

For those of you who haven't heard, Cpl Miller had another near-death experience

this last Sunday. He's goddamned lucky. Let's all give him a phone call...or shoot him an email...and let him know that we care about him and that he's got to keep his head on straight if he's going to make good on the gift that Cpl Dunham gave him....

Semper Kilo.

Marines who had served under Cpl. Miller in Ramadi sent letters and emails to the judge who would hear his case. "This Marine has only to begin his life," wrote LCpl. Robert B. Bullard. "To rob him of what he has done for me, my platoon, and country would not only be morally incorrect but a criminal act against a mistake."

Mrs. Dunham wrote a lengthy letter telling the judge how Cpl. Miller had rushed to her son's side that day in Iraq. She described how he had since stepped in as a surrogate brother to her youngest children.

She also described how Kelly "has been chasing his personal demons" since Jason sacrificed himself. "I wish you would consider that Kelly is an honorable young man who volunteered to serve and protect those weaker than himself," she wrote.

On Nov. 10, at the opening of the Marine Corps museum in Quantico, Va., President Bush announced his decision to award Cpl. Dunham the Medal of Honor. Leaving the ceremony, Mrs. Dunham talked about the legacy of her son's death. "I'm worried about Kelly," she said. "It's a gift. Strings aren't attached to it. Guilt shouldn't be attached to it. They should just do the best they can with their lives."

The Dunhams have invited dozens of Kilo Co. Marines to Thursday's Medal of Honor presentation in the East Room of the White House. The award, they say, isn't just for their son; it's for all of the young men who served beside him.

Two weeks later, Cpl. Miller is due back in court. His lawyer is trying to persuade the judge and prosecutor to reduce the felony charges to misdemeanors, which would probably allow the corporal to avoid prison. If they agree, and he keeps his record clean for a few years, he could still apply to be a sheriff's deputy.

On his Web page Cpl. Miller writes: "I can't wait for the time to come for a new chapter in my life."