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Lance Cpl. Jonathan Taylor's legacy lives on through father's work



Lance Cpl. Jonathan Taylor lost his life in Helmund Province, Afghanistan on Dec. 1, 2009. He was an infantryman with 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division. (U.S. Navy Photo/Released)

Jacksonville, Fla. – Todd Taylor used to line the gate at Naval Air Station Jacksonville with American flags when a fallen service member was flown into the base. A Navy veteran himself and Fleet Readiness Center Southeast (FRCSE) employee, he felt an inner urge to do it.

“I never thought that my son would be coming home like that one day,” he said. “I never even thought about it.”

Todd's son Jonathan was born in Jacksonville on April 8, 1987 while his dad was still on active duty at the now-defunct Naval Air Station Cecil Field. Growing up, the outgoing boy with the beaming blue eyes loved playing practical jokes.

Like many young boys, he played with his Army men in his room, carrying out intense, fictitious battles with his plastic infantry.

“We knew from early on that he was going to join the military,” Todd said.

Yet it wasn't all camouflage and bayonets for the young Taylor. The father and son played



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video games together – baseball games were a favorite. They also were intense fans of the Florida Gators.

As Jonathan grew, so did his interest in academic pursuits. History was a favorite, earning him praise from his teachers. But the military always drew him.

As a boy, he joined the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps, and later joined the Army JROTC program at Wolfson High School. He excelled and upon graduation was accepted to South Carolina's prestigious military institute, The Citadel, where he majored in history.

"Another thing I never could understand was that he loved Latin," Todd said. "He was very good at it, but Latin? He was very intelligent."

But Latin and history weren't enough to hold Jonathan at The Citadel.

"The biggest thing was, he had a lot of friends who were already in the Marine Corps who were serving in Iraq," Todd said. "He didn't want to wait for three more years to go.

Jonathan left The Citadel after his freshman year and enlisted in the Marine Corps.

"He asked me what I thought, and I told him I thought he was crazy," Todd said. "I said, 'You've got the brains, you can be anything you want to be. Why do you want to be with the infantry on the front lines?'

"He said, 'That's what I want to do.'"

Taylor enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2007 and deployed to Iraq the following year. But by 2008, the previous year's troop surge had taken effect and Iraq was largely uneventful for Taylor and his comrades in the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division.

"They were bored over there," Todd said. "After he got back from Iraq, they pretty much knew they were going to Afghanistan and things were starting to heat up over there.

"He'd heard all the stuff from the other units who were already over there."

In the year between his return from Iraq and his deployment to Afghanistan, Jonathan trained and visited his family in Jacksonville. He deployed to Helmund Province, Afghanistan in September 2009.

In late November, Todd, his daughters and his wife were on the road to visit his wife's mother in Raleigh, North Carolina when his phone rang about 8 p.m. The phone number was blocked, a tell-tale sign his son was on the other end. But the reception crackled and the call dropped.

"Right after that, he called again and the reception was great," Todd said. "We were talking about University of Florida's football recruiting, and what we were going to do for



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Thanksgiving. I'd give him all the scores and updates.

"He got to talk to all of us on the phone, his sisters, everyone."

A few nights later on the other side of the world, a medical evacuation (medevac) helicopter lifted off into the night to save a Marine, gravely wounded from an improvised explosive device while on a nighttime foot patrol. Once the Marine was secured in the helicopter, the crew worked feverishly to save the wounded man. That work continued for 29 minutes at a field hospital. Despite their best efforts, the team of surgeons and nurses couldn't save the young Marine with the bright blue eyes.

In Jacksonville, Todd Taylor was back at work at FRCSE as part of the P-3C Orion modification team. He remembers the exact aircraft, an EP-3, on which he was working.

"It was a Tuesday," Todd said. "I'd gotten home and we were all eating dinner at the table when Jonathan's mom called.

"She said there were Marines at the door."

The family got in the car and drove to Jonathan's mother's house as Todd tried to reassure Jonathan's sisters.

"My daughters were freaking out, asking me what was going on," Todd said. "I said maybe he just got in an accident, we don't know. Then we got the news that Jonathan had been killed."

Jonathan's body was flown into Naval Air Station Jacksonville – the same airfield Todd passed every day driving into work – on a cold, gray December day. The Wolfson JROTC stood in formation as the plane approached.

Marines carried the flag-covered casket from the plane and laid their comrade in the waiting black hearse. Jacksonville Sheriff's Office motorcycle officers stood at attention. They led the long procession down Yorktown Avenue, past hundreds of Todd's coworkers who solemnly lined the street holding American flags.

Two days after the funeral, Todd got a chance at something most Gold Star families do not – and perhaps would not want. Aboard the medevac that went out in an effort to save his son that night in Afghanistan was a photographer from Time magazine named Lynsey Addario. She'd documented the whole trip. From photos taken through night-vision goggles in the helicopter, to gut-wrenching views inside the field hospital, she'd captured it all.

However, under the terms of her embed with the medevac unit, she had to have the service member's permission to publish any photos that would identify him. In Jonathan's case, that responsibility fell to Todd and Jonathan's mother. Addario had given her contact information to the Marine Corps, which the casualty assistance officer passed on to Todd.



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"About a week later I got all these pictures," Todd said. "Then the tough part began. Do I open this up? That was the hardest part."

The painful images portray an anguishing world to which only a select few are subjected – not the service member's comrades and certainly not family members. It is hallowed ground, especially when life slips away.

"My first reaction was that I wanted to see them," he said. "I don't care what they are, I want to see them. I need to see them."

"He was *my* son."

Ultimately, Todd and Jonathan's mother decided against allowing Time to release photos showing Jonathan, out of concern for his three younger sisters. Jonathan's parents did give their blessing for Time to publish others.

One in particular shows the operating room as the cadre of surgeons and nurses stand, with hands folded, over a flag-draped stretcher. Some stare at the ground, others seem to gaze into the distance. All look to be emotionally exhausted after 29 minutes trying to save the Marine.

For Todd Taylor, his struggle lasted much longer – and still lingers.

"I had a hard time focusing for a while," he said. "I was angry. I couldn't concentrate."

"The bad thing was that it was right around Christmas time as well, and that didn't help any. I love Christmas. I love the Christmas season, the music, hanging the lights, and I didn't want to do any of it."

But the elder Taylor found solace in reaching out to other Gold Star families.

"I'll always have his memory, and that will never be gone," Todd said. "I try to give back, instead of sulking in the fact my son is gone."

Todd makes annual visits to line the yards of other Gold Star families with American flags on the anniversaries of their family member's death. Last year, the sheet metal mechanic made each one a road sign, complete with their family member's rank and branch of service.

"It just shows them that on that day someone remembers besides just the family," he said.

Still, with Memorial Day comes thoughts of his son, he said.

"Right now, I'd hope to have him married and have a grandchild," he said. "Most of all, what I'd love to do if I had the chance, would just be to hug him."



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