



Fallen But Not Forgotten

By Fred Minnick

More than 500 Guardsmen have died in the war on terror. Every one of them has a story often best told by loved ones

Each time a U.S. service member dies in the war on terror, the Defense Department issues a statement identifying his or her name, hometown, unit, and cause and location of death—a fallen warrior’s life distilled into 50 words or less.

The news releases are the source of this magazine’s monthly National Guard casualty updates and the National Guard Bureau Web site’s “Some Gave All” roll.

But there is so much more to these heroes than appears in these tributes. Every one of them has a story made extraordinary by service and sacrifice even before his or her death.

These stories are often best told by loved ones left behind, people who remember their fallen children, spouses or parents as more than military personnel who gave their life for freedom. Their memories are more layered. The kind only family can have.

Here are three.

‘Everybody liked him so much’

1st Lt. Robert L. Henderson II

Died: April 17, 2004, of enemy small-arms fire in Divaniyah, Iraq

Age: 33

Home: Alvaton, Ky.

Unit: 2123rd Transportation Company, Kentucky Army

Survived by: Wife, Lisa; son, Peyton; mother, Lillian Givens; and sister, Melanie Ray.

When 1st Lt. Robert Henderson II was in elementary school, his mother, Lillian Givens, often received phone calls from the principal’s office saying her little boy was sick.

“Naturally, I’d just panic and go to school to pick him up,” says Givens, who had a heart attack one month after her son’s death. “We did this time and time again.”

Then one day, it was no longer the office calling Lillian. It was Robert. “He said, ‘Oh mama, I’m so sick. Get me out of school.’ Of course, I broke the speed limit to get there,” she remembers.

She’d take him to the doctor, and because Robert was such a brave little boy who survived tongue depressors, thermometers and an occasional shot, she bought Robert a toy every time.

Years later, Robert confessed that he was bored and really liked receiving toys. So he faked being sick. She says his tomfoolery followed him to high school, where he occasionally skipped school to hit the lake with friends.

But she never tried to stop him, even though she knew what he was up to. After all, she reasoned, those things were just part of growing up.

“I just prayed he’d be OK,” she says. And he always was.

Growing up, he collected model cars, baseball cards, played sports and was a die-hard Indianapolis Colts fan. Robert graduated from Western Kentucky University with a bachelor’s degree in finance and management.

As he grew, Robert became a man and impacted people everywhere he went.

Lillian says her boy had an undying compassion for others and he sported a “lead from the front” leadership style that made him special to his customers, co-workers and fellow soldiers.

“His customers liked him at Lowe’s [home-improvement store]. I’m always seeing someone that says when they got their new house, Robert helped them with furnishing the kitchen and refrigerators,” she says. “He would never just order somebody to do something. He would do it himself. And that, I guess, was one reason everybody liked him so much.”

While his approach to work makes her proud, the Robert she’ll remember is the picture-perfect man, who treated women with respect and always remembered her birthday and made her feel special on Mother’s Day.

“He always picked the perfect card. You read it, you knew it applied to you,” she says.

When Robert was in Iraq and Mother’s Day was approaching, he wrote Lillian a letter indicating he didn’t know if he could find a good card at the post exchange. In hopes of continuing a tradition of sweet thoughts to his mother on her special day, the lieutenant filled the letter with love.

“I knew that he was really thinking about me at that time,” she says. “I’ve got that letter on a table by the bed, and I look at it real often.”

Robert was also an animal lover. He and his wife, Lisa, who works for the Kentucky Humane Society, would search for stray dogs in rural areas and take them to towns and cities where there was



Lillian Gives and her son, 1st Lt. Robert Henderson II.

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a higher demand for adoption.

One time, the newlywed couple found a mother with four puppies. They raised the puppies until they were old enough to be adopted. But Robert couldn’t give them up. That trait seems to have been inherited by his son, Peyton, born after Robert’s death.

Lillian says Peyton especially loves puppies, which would put a smile on her

son’s face. Nonetheless, her boy is gone and her grandson will never know his father. However, she takes solace in believing Robert “would have been an excellent father.”

But would Robert have allowed Peyton to play hooky from school? Or would he buy him a toy every time he came down sick? To those questions, Lillian doesn’t really give an answer. She just smiles. ■

'I can feel Ryan with me'

Sgt. Ryan D. Jopek

Died: Aug. 2, 2006, from an improvised explosive device in Tikrit, Iraq

Age: 20

Home: Merrill, Wis.

Unit: 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, Wisconsin Army National Guard

Survived by: Mother, Tracy Jopek; father, Staff Sgt. Brian Jopek; sister, Jessica; and brother, Steven

Sgt. Ryan Jopek's last day on Earth was as honorable as it was tragic.

With just two weeks left on his deployment, Ryan volunteered for a mission—a convoy from Kuwait to Mosul, the city his father, Wisconsin Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Brian Jopek, was stationed in 2004.

"He'd been trying the whole deployment to get a mission to Mosul to see where I was," Brian says. "I'm proud of him for his performance as a soldier and not just going on that last mission, just volunteering to go."

Ryan was in basic training while Brian was attached to Task Force Olympia, the command and control element in northern Iraq.

He was honored his son joined the Guard, but he never encouraged him to do

so. It was Ryan's decision, the staff sergeant says.

Looking back on his son's life and his short military career, the Wisconsin Guard NCO believes Ryan wholeheartedly lived by the Army Values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage.

"You look at those values and see what they represent, that's life," Brian says. "In an ideal world that's how everybody should live their life."

Ryan's father was also proud of him for being a Chicago Bears fan in the heart of Green Bay Packers country and for never being a quitter. One story that brings a smile to the Brian's face is Ryan's eighth-grade football tryout.

"The first practice with all the equipment he got the ball and he just got hammered, nailed into the ground," Brian says. "From that point on, he didn't want to play football, but he wanted to be involved somehow, so he became the manager of the team."

The Jopeks moved to Merrill, Wis., when Ryan was 16, after living for several years in Chanute, Kan. His younger siblings, Jessica and Steven, would adjust just fine, the family figured, but they worried

Ryan might not fit in so late into his schooling.

That assumption, however, could not have been further off the mark. The bright-smiling Ryan quickly developed a loyal bunch of friends. He was among the last players off the bench on the basketball team and when the team was leading, the student section would yell, "Jopek, Jopek."

"His senior year he didn't get much playing time, and all his friends brought signs and chanted his name to get him into the game," says Tracy Jopek, Ryan's mother.

As a brother, Ryan was—to say the least—an affectionate bully.

"He would beat me up and just be like 'Yeah Steven. Who's the boss now?'" his brother says. "This would be while our parents were gone, and later on I would tell to get him in trouble."

After Ryan was disciplined for whipping up on his little brother, Steven usually enjoyed two weeks of freedom, being allowed to play video games, basketball or just hang out with his cool and popular older brother.

Steven always knew those moments were the ones that truly defined Ryan. The headlocks and body slams, well, that was

Staff Sgt. Brian Jopek and his son, Sgt. Ryan Jopek



Ryan just being a brother, making sure Steven understood his place in the family hierarchy.

But when push came to shove, “Ryan was always there for me,” Steven says. “That’s what I think about most when it comes to Ryan.”

He was there for total strangers, too. When Ryan was home on leave, he stopped at a convenience store and bought a few things from a Korean woman, who barely spoke English.

The woman’s husband, a Korean military veteran, met with Tracy after Ryan’s death and said his wife had a lot of problems with depression and is often treated badly by customers.

The man told Tracy that Ryan made her feel special. She told her husband, “I met the nicest young man today. He’s on leave from Iraq.”

It’s those small stories, which in some walks of life may not be considered important, that Tracy will always remember.

“Ryan needs to be remembered for being kind and gentle and how he always tried his hardest at everything,” she says.

The rest of the world is more likely to remember Ryan’s truck, a 1966 orange Chevrolet half-ton full-size pick up.

When Ryan left for Iraq, the truck was a clunker and was always breaking down. It was his dream to rebuild and refinish every inch of the classic vehicle.

To help this wish come true, a memorial fund was established. This past summer, auto workers from all around Wisconsin transformed a fallen soldier’s dream into reality, giving the car a new 350 V8 engine, transmission and wheels, upgrading the suspension parts, and powder coating the frame and rear axle.

“They called it ‘wheels-up restoration,’” Brian says. “This truck was his baby. He would love it.”

In July, the once dim-colored truck, turned slick orange and chrome took first place at a major Wisconsin auto show.

The two (divorced) parents and their remaining children now take turns driving the truck around the Dairy State, giving onlookers a glimpse into Ryan’s life.

Most likely notice the 32nd Brigade Arrow sticker with a yellow ribbon that reads, “In Memory of Sgt. Ryan Jopek. Support Our Troops.”

If not, they’re probably mesmerized by the thunderous—though somewhat harmonious—roars coming from the beauty’s tailpipe, or the glowing reflections gleaming off the chrome hubcaps.

“When I drive that truck,” Brian says, “I can feel Ryan with me.” ■

‘He could just smile at you and make you smile’

Staff Sgt. Paul S. Pabla

Died: July 3, 2006, of enemy sniper fire in Mosul, Iraq

Age: 23

Home: Fort Wayne, Ind.

Unit: 3rd Battalion, 139th Field Artillery, Indiana Army National Guard

Survived by: Mother, Lisa Carroll; father, Sarvijit Pabla; and brother, Neil

As a boy, Staff Sgt. Paul Pabla loved to show off.

When his family gathered in the living room, Paul took his shirt off and flexed his muscles like his favorite cartoon hero, He-Man. But his mom says he didn’t quite have as impressive biceps as “The Most Powerful Man in the Universe.”

“He was skinny as could be back then,” remembers Lisa Carroll, Paul’s mother.

Paul might have been skinny because he didn’t take his vitamins.

“I thought he and his brother were taking their vitamins, but they were hiding them behind the couch or underneath the cushion,” she says.

Although a little guy, Paul was full of strength and energy. He constantly wrestled with his brother, Neil, and played

baseball, soccer and football.


“He was so full of life,” says Lisa, a single mother. “He loved life. He did everything he set out to do; he gave it his all. He was very loving, very intelligent, very caring and funny.”

But that wonderful life was not without adversity.

Lisa says Paul faced a lot of racial prejudice, and some people perceived him as shy. But in fact, she says, “He was very guarded. I think because of his coloring and in the small town of Huntington, predominantly white community, he stuck out. He got razzed by some people. But his friends accepted him for who he was; he really took that to heart and they were his true friends for life.”

However, Paul never lashed out against bigots, and he didn’t seek trouble. He just





kept working on himself. In fact, he never said a word to his mother about his encounters with racism until the day he left for Iraq.

Looking back, Lisa says, “Paul never seemed angry.”

One thing Paul definitely seemed to be: a Lady’s Man.

“The girls liked Paul,” Lisa says. “One friend mentioned, ‘You wouldn’t believe how many girls told me that they and Paul were going to date when he got back.’ Now, how he planned on dating them all I’ll never know.”

Although a bit of a Casanova, Paul had a huge heart and he loved his mother, who says her son became a source of strength.

“He could just smile at you and make you smile. Anytime I got frazzled, he would always give me the pep talk. He would always say, ‘Life was good. Tomorrow would be a better day, don’t fret today.’ One thing he liked to do, though, was push my buttons. And he knew exactly which ones to push.”

Paul was a student at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., studying criminal justice, and a member of the Sigma Nu Fraternity.

“He was a whiz at math, just like his brother,” Lisa says. “He could skip class, never study for the test, and still always ace it.”

Paul also became a marathon runner and cyclist. He was a fitness fanatic in every sense, Lisa remembers, from the things he ate to his workout regimen. In Iraq, Paul pumped iron every spare moment.

“He would send me pictures of his muscles and tell me how big he was get-



Lisa Carroll and her son, Staff Sgt. Paul Pabla

ting, saying ‘I’m bigger now than I’ve ever been in my life, Mom.’”

Those pictures revealed a Paul Pabla filled with vigor and with the biceps and abs befitting his work ethic. And to think Paul used to be nothing but a skinny little boy running around the living room.

His transformation into a muscular American hero would have made He-Man proud. 🦋

Fred Minnick, an Iraq war veteran, is a Louisville, Ky.-based freelance writer and photographer.