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The Intelligencer

'Warriors for freedom, brothers forever'

By: GARY WECKSELBLATT The Intelligencer

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PHOTO GALLERY

The remains of Marine 1st Lt. Travis Manion were reburied in Arlington National Cemetery. The remains of his best friend, Navy Seal Lt. Brendan Looney, will be interred at Arlington on Monday.

A young Doylestown Township man who exemplified the selflessness of this nation's elite service members was laid to rest Friday.

In an emotional and thought-provoking ceremony, Marine 1st Lt. Travis Manion, who gave his life in Iraq so those under his leadership could live, was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, to be joined Monday by his "greatest friend."

The story of Manion and Navy Seal Lt. Brendan Looney is one forever burned in our memories - two young heroes killed in action not long after developing an unbreakable bond as roommates at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Manion's remains were removed Friday from Calvary Cemetery in West Conshohocken, where they have been for three years, and taken to Arlington to fulfill his wish to be buried there. The move was inspired following the tragic death of Looney, 29, on Sept. 21 in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan, just two weeks before he was scheduled to conclude his military career.

When Looney's parents, Kevin and Maureen of Maryland, learned of their son's fate, they asked Tom and Janet Manion, Travis' mom and dad, to be at their side when they retrieved Brendan's body from Dover Air Force Base.

The Looneys, along with Brendan's widow, Amy, wanted the two men who called themselves "brothers from another mother" to be buried side by side.

The first part of that pact took place Friday, with the burial of Travis under a sunny sky in ground surrounded by 300,000 fellow Marines and soldiers. Manion is the 469th Iraq casualty in Arlington's section 60, an area filling up in too short a time with America's bravest.

Nearly 200 people witnessed the ceremony, including several Naval Academy alumni, as cars lined the cemetery's York Drive.

They came to pay respects to the 26-year-old Manion, whose slogan "if not me, then who?" said all you needed to know of his leadership.

Tom Manion, who spoke from the heart at his son's gravesite, described the day as one of mixed emotions, losing these "warrior brothers ... to the evil that faces our world" and acknowledging "the void in our hearts."

But he also spoke of the love Travis and Brendan "had for this country" and the pride to have his son "rest in this solemn place."

He told the Looneys, "our heart goes out to you. Brendan represented the best this country has to offer."

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Bill Looney, who followed his older brother's footsteps into the Naval Academy, told a reporter after the service that the two families have an "awesome bond."

He said the side-by-side burials will help the families "sleep easy at night."

Though Manion and Looney were mostly separated following their Naval Academy graduation, they remained in one another's heart.

On his wedding day in 2008, Brendan Looney handed Janet Manion his Navy SEAL Trident, telling her, "I want you to have this because Travis earned it right along with me."

Two days later, Looney deployed to Iraq, the first of four tours in that country and Afghanistan. When serving his country, he always wore three special items, his wedding band, his watch and a bracelet given to him by Janet Manion with Travis' name.

As Tom Manion spoke in front of the Marine Honor Guard, a large portrait of a smiling Travis nearby, he pulled another forever grieving family into this stirring story.

Mark and Nancy Umbrell of Doylestown were among Friday's mourners. Their son, 1st Lt. Colby Umbrell, a 26-year-old Airborne Ranger, was killed in Iraq only four days after Travis - another graduate of the Naval Academy.

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Manion called Umbrell "a hero buried just a few yards away on this sacred ground."

Travis Manion was serving his second tour in Iraq when he was killed April 29, 2007. He was embedded with an Iraqi army unit he was leading and training. While on patrol, that unit came under sniper fire.

After giving first aid to the wounded, Manion was killed when he advanced to make himself a target and enable the rescue of his wounded Marines.

He was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star with Valor and the Silver Star for his heroic actions. As a testament to the admiration his unit had for him, the Iraqis named their new headquarters Combat Outpost Manion in his honor.

The Marines paid tribute to their fallen hero again Friday. Meticulously, six of them holding an American flag, folding it with precision, the last man embracing it close to his heart.

As it was handed to Gunnery Marine Sgt. William Dixon, with the honor guard saluting, Dixon walked toward the Manions, seated for the ceremony, and knelt in front of them. He handed the flag to Tom Manion, himself a former Marine colonel, shook his hand, and shared a few words.

Later, Manion expressed the love he had for his son and his son's love for this country.

"God bless you my son, and rest in peace with your warrior brother," Tom Manion said. "Warriors for freedom, brothers forever."

The Looneys have asked that in lieu of flowers, donations be made in Brendan's name to the Travis Manion Foundation, which aids wounded members of the military.

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