

## A grateful nation: remember the heroes

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'On behalf of a grateful nation": The words immediately caught my attention on my second trip to the reception building at Dover Air Force base. They are a message from our nation to the families of fallen heroes, written across the wall at the building entrance.

My first trip was three years before, as our son Travis was returned to us from his second tour in Iraq after making the ultimate sacrifice for our country and our freedoms. This time, we were with the family of Brendan Looney, Travis' dear friend and Naval Academy roommate; while deployed to Afghanistan as a Navy SEAL, Brendan also made the ultimate sacrifice.



**Fallen: First Lt. Travis Manion, USMC (l), at US Naval Academy graduation with his roommate and friend Brendan Looney. Manion fell in Iraq, while Looney, who later trained as a Navy SEAL, died in Afghanistan.**

The pain resurfaced -- it never goes away, but it was now vivid again. Nothing hurts worse. My wife and I understood the Looneys were dealing with something unbearable. We also knew there was no other place to be as Brendan returned home, doing whatever we could to help console and support this great American family as they dealt with this heartbreaking news.

The words on the wall have lingered with me since. Now, on Memorial Day, as we approach the 10th anniversary of 9/11, how does this "grateful nation" show its appreciation for the sacrifice of these brave patriots?

By remembering, not just the faceless names or the numbers etched in a tally report, but through understanding the essence and character of these heroes . . . sharing their love of country and their passion for service above self.

Here are a few that may help you better understand these brave patriots.

Taylor Prazynski was a young Marine from Ohio killed in Iraq in 2005. In high school, he and a buddy taught a classmate with the spina bifida to walk. His father told us Taylor was so idealistic it never occurred to him he couldn't teach someone to walk. That young man walked into Taylor's funeral to pay his final respects, his life changed forever thanks to Taylor's need to make a difference.

Justin Davis grew up in Maryland, an only child who dreamed of making the world a better place. He was killed in 2006 in Afghanistan while fighting with the Army's 10th Mountain Division at age 19. His mother had asked him why he would choose to fight in a war when he was her only child; he replied: "You should have had more kids. You are going to have to 'man up' and be tough, mom." Justin dreamed of making a difference in our world.

Dan Riordan was an Army 1st lieutenant from Missouri who gave his life in Iraq in 2007. Before joining the military, Dan was involved in every possible activity, passionate about helping others and serving those around him. The Army major who trained him remembered him this way: "Dan was one of those rare people who genuinely cared more for the welfare of those around him than for his own." His family continues to inspire students, encouraging them and helping fund their dreams in his name.

Luke Pyeatt was killed in Afghanistan earlier this year while deployed as a Marine. He was devoted to others, learning sign language in high school to better talk to a deaf friend. What started as service to one friend opened doors to learning languages and gave him the opportunity to learn Pashto, one of the main Afghan languages -- a skill that helped make life safer for his Marines. Luke volunteered for his final patrol, saying he wanted to know what his team members would be facing before they went into action.

Then there's Brendan Looney -- known first and foremost as a guy who'd never let you down, reliable and always ready to help those in need. He finished top in his class at SEAL training after pledging to complete it in honor of his roommate and friend Travis Manion. Devoted husband, loving son and brother, a patriot who volunteered to serve multiple times in combat -- his final tour with 58 combat missions and a Bronze Star with Valor for heroism. I'm sure SEAL Team 6 remembered Brendan during their mission to find bin Laden.

So today in your community, remember to ask about this generation of brave American patriots who stepped forward to make a difference. There are many incredible stories to hear, stories that will only stay alive as long as we tell them. And to Taylor, Justin, Dan, Luke, Brendan, Travis and all the brave heroes who have given their tomorrow for our today . . . we will never forget.

*Tom Manion is currently a board member of the Travis Manion Foundation (TravisManion.com).*