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### If Not Me, Then Who? The Travis Manion Story

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By AML Publisher

AroundMainLine.com presents the first of a three-part series highlighting a special group of local families who have lost a child and created charities in their honor. AML sat down with Janet and Tom Manion of Doylestown to learn of their work in continuing the legacy of their son, 1st Lieutenant Travis Manion. Travis Manion was serving his second tour in Iraq in a reconnaissance battalion during the spring of 2007 when he died in a sniper attack. The Bucks County family, along with the support of hundreds of friends, has created a successful foundation in Travis' honor. On Friday December 5th, 1st Lt. Travis L. Manion, USMC was awarded posthumously with the military's third highest award, the Silver Star, at a ceremony at the Doylestown Courthouse in Doylestown, PA. Lieutenant General John Allen, USMC, presented the Silver Star and the Bronze Star with Valor awards to Travis' parents, Colonel Tom Manion and Janet Manion.

#### The All-American Boy

At LaSalle College High School in Wyndmoor in the late '90s, Travis Manion was a popular, well-liked student. A three-sport star athlete, Manion excelled in football, wrestling and lacrosse, and was a member of five Catholic League Championship Teams. A six-time first team All-Catholic, he earned All-American honors in wrestling and was awarded the Hal Selvey, Jr. Memorial Award for Unselfish Dedication and Leadership, presented by the Philadelphia Wrestling Association in 1999.



1st Lt. Travis Manion was awarded with the military's third highest award, The Silver Star, at the Doylestown Courthouse on December 5th.

Manion was also one of the top students in his class, maintaining a 3.7 GPA. Needless to say, when it came time to consider his college education, Travis Manion had his pick of the top universities in America. But Manion, born on a Marine base when his father was stationed in North Carolina at Camp LeJeune, had only one campus in mind – the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

Fresh-faced, athletic, handsome and with his life ahead of him, Travis Manion was accepted into the Naval Academy in the Spring of 1999. "During his junior year, he really had started to



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consider the Navy. And, he did not want to apply really anywhere else; he had his focus on being in the Navy and going to Annapolis. He decided on his own, even though he was exposed to a lot with growing up in a military family,” Tom Manion, his father, explained (in 2008 Tom Manion, a retired Marine Corps reserve colonel, ran as a Republican candidate for the 8th Congressional District of Pennsylvania).

But after a challenging first semester at Navy, Travis called back home to his father before Thanksgiving break. Manion wanted out of the academy—the experience had not been what he expected. “He wanted to come back; he was just not liking it. And he had been there since Fourth of July weekend and it was not easy. Travis thought he was really missing out on a real college experience after speaking with his sister who was at Widener,” Mr. Manion explained.

For a young man whose grades and athletics had always come so easily, Travis found Annapolis an unexpected challenge. “So we made him finish out the semester and when he came home for the holidays, we told him to find another school, which he did. But, in his heart he still wanted to be in Annapolis and we could see that,” said Mrs. Manion. After some soul searching and a short time at a local college in Philadelphia, Travis Manion decided to return to the Naval Academy in January of 2001...nine months before a pivotal day in America would carve out his future in the military.

**Sept 11, 2001**

After his return to Annapolis, Manion picked up where he left off in high school, excelling on the Naval Academy’s wrestling team before an injury sidelined him his senior year. Even though Travis Manion had been exposed as a child to family members in the military, nothing could have prepared him for the morning of September 11th. “He called me on my cell from the academy, and he was very distraught. He was very impacted by that day; the school was in lock-down. And, for Travis, he said at that moment, it had really opened up his eyes and to all the cadets about the choices they had made to serve their country. And, it was a different reality for everyone, but especially for these young kids in the academy,” Mr. Manion recalled.

Manion graduated in the top 5 of his class at the Academy in 2004 and chose to become a United States Marine Corps officer. He finished in the top of his class at his basic officer training in Quantico, Virginia and was awarded a regular commission in the Corps.



**“No Sir, But I Did Sleep in a Holiday Inn Express Last Night.”**

Travis Manion is getting ready to deploy to Iraq. During the summer of ‘05 he heads out to Arizona for intense pre-deployment training in the Mojave desert. Summer temperatures, much like the anticipated elements in Iraq, soared above 120 degrees on a daily basis. Despite the stifling heat, fatigue and intense training exercises, Lieutenant Travis Manion found time to have some comic relief.

Mr. Manion recalled the incident. “They were out on an exercise, coordinating how to bring in air units. They have umpires that grade you—the guys call them coyotes. And, one of the umpires was particularly loud and intense. After an exercise that didn’t go as planned, the coyote decides to lay into Travis pretty hard. Over the intercom the coyote says

to him, ‘Hey Lieutenant Manion, do you have any idea what the hell you are doing?’ And Travis, so frustrated and overwhelmed with everything they are learning, says back without missing a beat, ‘No sir, but I did sleep in a Holiday Inn Express last night,’” Mr. Manion recalled. When they came back to the battalion, the Colonel and the coyote were waiting for Travis to see who this clever first lieutenant was. Travis had made his presence known.

**April 29, 2007**

That August of 2005, Manion is deployed to Iraq for a tour of duty. URL: <http://aroundmainline.com/living/for-the-ones-who-the-travis-manion-story.html>

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Doylestown in March of '06 on an extension, scheduled to return in one year. But, looking for experienced Iraq veterans, Travis was selected to be part of a military transition team and in September he was pulled from 1st Recon to train with ten other Marines who would be attached to an Iraq Army Battalion in Fallujah. Manion leaves for Camp Pendleton, the major Marine west coast training base, just outside of San Diego, the week before Christmas. It was the final time the Manions would see Travis. He is deployed on December 26, 2006.

Things were heating up in Fallujah in the early spring of '07. President Bush's surge is in full swing—the government's plan to increase the number of troops in order to provide security to Baghdad and the Al Ambar Province. Travis Manion is calling home more frequently, not able to discuss what is transpiring in Iraq and what his role is in Operation Iraqi Freedom. His calls are solely focused on making sure his family is doing well at home and he deflects any questions about the environment in Fallujah. But, it is very clear to the Manions from their chats with Travis that things are rapidly intensifying.

On the morning of April 29, 2007 Lieutenant Travis Manion and his patrol are caught in a trap—ambushed by a group of Iraqis. Manion was hit by enemy sniper fire in the Al Ambar Province and was the only soldier who was killed in the entire patrol that day. "Travis put himself out there, and he thought about his guys first. That does not surprise us at all," said Tom Manion.

Janet Manion vividly recalls the day and moment they found out Travis had died. "It was very odd. For some reason that morning, I woke up and started calling my family members. I called my Mom, my brothers and sister to come over. It's like Travis did it from heaven to make sure I would be surrounded by loved ones when we found out. Travis died just after 7:30 a.m. our time that morning, and I turned to (my husband) Tom around eight o'clock and I said to him 'I just want everybody around today, let's get everybody over here.' And everybody was over, lots of family came by. And, we had a knock at the door—it was our friend from Ardmore who had been in the Marine Corp with Tom. And, we just thought they were in the neighborhood and were stopping by to say hi. But they came over with an officer from Willow Grove who happened to be a classmate of Travis' at the Naval Academy. And, when I saw out the window the officer behind them, I knew what had happened. It was horrible, the worst day of your life. We just looked at each other and said, 'No, no...' We did not want to believe it. You're numb and in complete shock," recalled Mrs. Manion.

Both Janet and Tom Manion come from large local families, and they were soon surrounded by hundreds of visitors and supporters. The Manions had Travis flown into Willow Grove for his funeral procession, and the state closed the Pennsylvania Turnpike (for the first time ever) to allow for the hundreds of cars and over a thousand mourners. The local outpouring of love gave the Manions a sense of comfort. "It helped a lot, nothing helps completely of course. But, as a mother, it is very reassuring to know your child touched thousands of lives. People still write to us regularly, a year and half later, to tell us a story about Travis," Mrs. Manion said.

**"Mom, America does not know how good they have it..."**

After things settled down and the Manions had started to heal from their loss, Mrs. Manion felt that she wanted to make others aware of not only her son's sacrifice for their country, but the ongoing efforts of the men and women serving overseas. "In January 2007, during one of our final phone conversations, Travis said to me, 'Mom, America does not know how good they have it and all the good the young men and women over here are doing for them. They need to know.' After Travis' death, I kept hearing those words over and over, that conversation in my head. And, I thought to myself, I have to do something to carry on that message to others but also to continue Travis' legacy," Janet Manion recalled.

Tom Manion was similarly inspired. A week before Travis died he called his father from Fallujah—it was one of their longer conversations. "He said, 'Dad, we are fighting for our freedoms over here. And, I don't think the rest of America gets that or knows that.' And that's the message we want to carry on through the foundation because that was Travis' message in



*Manion's legacy lives on in the Travis Manion Foundation's commitment to support military families, assist wounded veterans and provide various scholarships.*

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the message we want to carry on through the foundation because that was Travis' message up until the very end of his life here on earth," recalled Tom Manion.

A family friend set up a memorial fund shortly after Travis' funeral and it took off—growing in leaps and bounds from the beginning. Now, an annual golf outing with a silent auction, a scholarship fund at LaSalle and a 5k run in downtown Doylestown are just a small part of the events that contribute to the foundation. The Travis Manion Foundation ([www.travismanion.com](http://www.travismanion.com)) aims to support military families, assist wounded veterans and provide various scholarships in Travis' name. Last year, the foundation supported two fellowships for wounded Marines and a Good Grief Seminar for families of fallen service members. As for the Manions, they are surrounded in their Doylestown home by dozens of pictures, hundreds of letters, hand sewn blankets, and handmade memorials strangers mail to them regularly. The walls are decorated with pictures of Travis—from his childhood to his days at the academy. Tabletop memorials to their son's legacy are scattered throughout as a remembrance of the ultimate sacrifice he made for his country and the memories he left behind.

"Travis always wanted to help people – he was always good at that. And, he was physically fit and well-educated and through the Travis Manion Foundation, we are going to continue his message. He was a big ox of a person, a big, athletic boy, but he had the softest heart. And to me he was just the kindest person. That is how I want people to know and remember him," Mrs. Manion said.

### **"If not me, then who?"**

During his first stay at home, Travis and his brother-in-law attended an Eagles game at Lincoln Financial Field. As they were leaving the stadium, Travis' brother-in-law joked with Travis that if he tripped him and broke his leg, Travis would not have to return to Iraq and could stay home in Doylestown. Travis turned to him and said, "Hey Dave, if not me, then who?" Those inspirational words are printed on the backs of hundreds of t-shirts for the annual 5k run in downtown Doylestown each fall that benefits the foundation. "That is the reason why I chose to run for a local Senate seat, because of those words," Mr. Manion said.

### **The Marine Corp Marathon**



*The Iraqis Travis had served with were devastated by his death, and chose to remember him by renaming an outpost in his honor. Only two outposts in Iraq are named for Americans.*

In addition to the regular work of the Travis Manion Foundation, a contingency of families and friends have committed to competing in the Marine Corp Marathon, in the Philadelphia Distance Run and various local races in the tri-state region each year as part of 'Team Travis.' On October 28, 2007, Tom Manion successfully completed the Marine Corp Marathon (the fourth largest marathon in the United States) with his brother Chris by his side at the finish line. It was a race that Travis had signed up for from Iraq one month before his death and planned to compete in. Along with Tom Manion and his brother last fall, 100 marathon runners and 80 10K participants competed for Team Travis, as part of a

fundraising effort for the foundation. This past October, dozens of Team Travis t-shirts crossed the finish line once again in Washington, D.C., included in the 18,000 racers was his uncle Chris.

That morning last September in the 2007 race, almost six months to the day after his son's death, Mr. Manion laced up his sneakers with his running chip on one foot, and with Travis' chip on the other. But, in the stress and anticipation of the race, Tom Manion forgot to check to see which chip was placed on each sneaker, as he had planned to have the foot with Travis' chip cross the finish line first. Travis Manion finished the marathon that afternoon as runner 7,566—one second ahead of his father as Mr. Manion's right foot (with Travis' running chip) crossed the finish line at 4:19:39. In death and in life, 1st Lieutenant Travis Manion proved he will always be a champion.

**Donations to the 1st Travis L. Manion USMC Memorial Fund can be mailed to: 1st Lt. Travis L. Manion USMC Memorial Fund, P.O. Box 1485 Doylestown, PA 18901. Donations can also be made online [www.travismanion.com](http://www.travismanion.com). A video tribute to Travis Manion can be viewed on [youtube.com](http://youtube.com)**

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