

Navy roommates shared their lives, now lie together at Arlington

Travis Manion and Brendan Looney, who became great friends at Annapolis, occupy neighboring graves at Arlington

By Childs Walker, The Baltimore Sun

9:42 a.m. EDT, May 28, 2011

That Travis Manion and Brendan Looney ended up side by side should surprise no one.

Loved ones had always been struck by the similarities between the **Naval Academy** roommates — both family men, both rugged athletes, both warriors who yearned to reach the heart of action.



Pictures: Navy roommates buried at Arlington National Cemetery

Now, they needed to be together again. It was the only bit of comfort Amy Looney could fathom as she watched white-gloved soldiers carry her husband's casket from the back of an airplane at Dover Air Force Base last September.

Three years earlier, a sniper had shot Travis in Iraq after he exposed himself to enemy fire so he could drag wounded comrades from an ambush. Now, Brendan was gone as well, killed in a helicopter crash in **Afghanistan**.

Confronted with that cruel reality, Amy Looney was sure what had to happen next: Brendan, the absurdly tough Navy SEAL she had fallen for back in Annapolis, would want to spend eternity beside Travis in Arlington National Cemetery.

In life, they laughed at jokes that only they were in on, blended into one another's families and talked quietly of their hunger to fight where they were needed most. Amy Looney wanted all of that to endure beyond terrible loss.

"It was the only peace I could find in the whole situation," she says.

When she made her thoughts known, the Manions agreed that the men belonged together, even though that meant moving their son from a Pennsylvania cemetery.

Travis was reinterred at Arlington on a Friday in early October, and Brendan was buried to his left the following Monday.

There they lie.

Though undeniably tragic, the culmination of Travis and Brendan's bond is more than that for the people who loved them. It's a story of bravery, of goodness, of two men who died doing what they were put on the earth to do.

"They're probably the two best guys I've ever known and the two best guys I ever will know," says their friend and academy classmate Ben Mathews. "I think it means something that they're together. It's terrible that they had to give their lives, but they're shining examples of what Americans can strive to be."

Brendan was days from beginning SEAL training in San Diego when the news of Travis' death tore his world asunder. His sister, Erin, had always viewed him as indestructible and was taken aback to hear him hurt so badly. "That was the toughest part," she says. "It was the first time I ever saw Brendan in a different light. Not that he wasn't still tough, but maybe he was a little more vulnerable."

The Navy would not allow Brendan to leave for the funeral. In his fury, he briefly considered quitting. Instead, he dedicated his training to Travis and won the coveted "Honor Man" spot as the top graduate of his class.

On missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Brendan wore two personal items — his wedding ring and a metal wrist band Travis' parents gave him to commemorate his friend. At his wedding reception in 2008, he handed Travis' mom, Janet, the gold trident pin he received for completing SEAL training.

"I only got this because of Travis," he said.

Destined to be a Marine

Travis Manion grew up in Doylestown, Pa., a borough of tree-lined streets and tidy shops 30 miles north of Philadelphia.

The foundation bearing his name, which gives grants to wounded veterans for community service projects, is housed just off Main Street. Janet Manion's office is a mini-shrine to her son. Photos of him in his wrestling uniform and combat gear surround her desk. On the window sill sits a note from local elementary-schooler Luke Sliwinski, who wrote, "I always try to do things that would make Travis proud. He is my hero. Semper Fi."

The Manions are well-known in Doylestown. Hundreds lined the streets to watch Travis' flag-draped casket proceed from a downtown church to a cemetery on the outskirts of town. Travis' father, Tom, ran for Congress the following year, arguing that too many people in government had set aside the needs of American troops. He didn't win but spread his son's story as a symbol of daily combat sacrifices that are too often out of sight, out of mind.

Janet walks into her favorite sandwich shop on a pleasant fall afternoon, less than two weeks after her son was buried at Arlington.

"I can't even comprehend how difficult that must have been," the shop's owner says. "But it's a beautiful place. He's near his buddy."

She smiles and says yes, that's a comfort.

Travis was born at **Camp Lejeune**, N.C., and the family moved around in his early years, when Tom was still an active-duty Marine colonel. The boy loved to put on his dad's camouflage gear and protect his buddies during imagined backyard combat. He and his older sister, Ryan Manion Borek, often belted out the Marine Corps hymn on the family couch.

"He wouldn't hurt a butterfly," Janet says. "If someone was mean to him, he'd really take it to heart."

The Manions moved to Doylestown when Travis was in elementary school so his father could take an executive job at **Johnson and Johnson**. Shortly after, Janet got an early glimpse of her son's sense of justice.

He became fast friends with Steve Brown, one of the few black students at his school. One afternoon, the boys went to get pizza at Travis' favorite downtown shop. Brown ordered a slice of pepperoni, but the man at the counter looked right past him and asked Travis what he wanted. Brown again asked for a slice of pepperoni and again, the man looked past him and asked for Travis' order.

"I'd like a slice of pepperoni," Travis said. The sixth-grader got his pizza and quickly handed it to his buddy, according to Janet. "You know what. We're not going to come back here," he told the counterman who had ignored Brown. Sure

enough, Janet says, he boycotted the joint from then on.

Travis grew into a strapping kid who earned top grades in history and math and loved to question just about everything. At La Salle, the Catholic school he entered in ninth grade, he starred on the football, wrestling and lacrosse teams and fit easily into the popular crowd.

Travis grew up around family friends who had attended the Naval Academy, but his parents were surprised when he insisted on Annapolis as his only possible destination for college. They cajoled him into applying to a few less selective schools. But during a family move a few years later, Janet found the application forms, never sent, in one of his drawers.

Travis adjusted to plebe summer more easily than most. He was plenty strong for the physical challenges and plenty bright for the intellectual ones. "Your son's going to do great," an officer told the Manions when they visited him for the first time.

By October, however, Travis had his doubts about academy life. He heard his sister's tales of carefree college nights and bristled at the restrictions on his time. He had to finish the semester, his parents told him. But when Travis went home for winter break, he arranged a transfer to Drexel and left Navy behind.

Big brother

Brendan Looney grew up in Calvert County, the oldest of six siblings in an affectionate but tough Irish Catholic family.

"We expected a lot out of them," says his father, Kevin Looney. "We told them that you're given a lot, so we expect a lot."

Brendan took his role as big brother seriously. When Christmas approached, he called conferences with his two brothers and three sisters so they could synchronize their lists and maximize the gift haul for the entire tribe. He practiced tackling and wrestling with his little brothers, Steve and Billy, making sure that if anyone ever tried to pick on them, they'd be ready.

Brendan's sister, Erin, remembers how hard the younger siblings worked to earn his favor. He liked to construct challenges that pitted one against the other. One day, it might be a race to see which little sister could jump through the ceiling fan without getting her head whacked. The next, Brendan might strap Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle pillows to their arms and coach them through a wrestling match. The prize? His weight belt wrapped in tinfoil.

Time in his room was an even greater reward.

"I don't even know that we were allowed to talk," Erin says. "But just getting to hang out with him, you would think, 'Man, this is a good day.'"

Erin could only laugh when war-hardened SEALs approached her at Brendan's funeral and told her how *they* had cherished any chance to hang in her brother's quarters.

All the male Looneys went to DeMatha for high school, and there was no doubt Brendan would follow the line to Hyattsville. He threw himself into sports, starting on both offense and defense for a football powerhouse that sent players to major Division I programs and the **NFL**. Even after a hard afternoon practice and an hour-long ride home, Brendan often ran up and down the quarter-mile hill behind his family's home.

"When it came to the fourth quarter of a game, he wanted to know that he had worked harder than the other guy," says Kevin, his voice catching and tears welling in his eyes.

He was the type who ran every practice sprint as hard as he could, stayed late to coach younger players and changed games with his reckless hits.

"Without a doubt, Brendan was the leader of that team," says longtime DeMatha coach Bill McGregor. "There might have been better athletes, but he was the leader."

Because he was only 5-foot-10 and lacked the speed of a pro receiver, Brendan did not draw attention from the flashy football schools that recruited his friends. But he wanted to play Division I and that goal steered him to Navy, which often recruits undersized but tough prospects.

Brendan started at the academy's prep school in Rhode Island, because he was colorblind and there were only so many slots in Annapolis for colorblind midshipmen. He stood out from his first day, says another former roommate, Neil Toohey. He met standards easily and in his spare time, helped others reach them. He even folded Toohey's socks and underwear so his friend wouldn't get in trouble during inspection.

"He had a leg up on the rest of us, but rather than show us up, he helped us out," Toohey says. "Who else would fold my laundry?"

Birth of a friendship

In April of his first semester at Drexel, Travis called his mother from a bar, where he was partying with fellow lacrosse players.

"I want to go back to the academy," he told her. "These guys don't take college seriously enough."

Travis had lapped up the regular college life he believed he was missing in Annapolis and had decided the taste didn't suit him. But as hard as the academy is to enter in the first place, it's even harder to re-enter.

Tom Manion drove his son to Annapolis and sat in the parking lot as Travis tried to talk a colonel into letting him come back. The teenager said time away had taught him that he needed to be at a school where every day was lived with purpose. He got his readmission.

Travis returned in the winter of 2001 to resume his plebe year with a batch of midshipmen who had never met him and had spent months forging bonds without him. Brendan was in his new company.

But they didn't know each other well until the academy paired them as roommates in their sophomore year. The living arrangement proved auspicious, bringing two kindred spirits together.

"Brendan and Travis are so similar, so similar," Erin Looney says.

Travis visited the Looney house in Silver Spring on weekends, forming tight bonds with Brendan's brothers, who were academy-bound, and keeping a watchful eye on his friend's sisters. In turn, Brendan loved to relax at the second home the Manions kept in Annapolis, near the academy campus.

They often described themselves as "brothers from another mother," the Manions say.

Erin Looney laughs, recalling how Travis was just as likely as Brendan to cast a skeptical eye at a Looney sister and say, "Why are you looking at that boy?"

"It was like jeez, Travis, I've already got three of these guys watching everything I do," she says.

Once, Brendan phoned from California and insisted that his youngest sister, Kelly, put her boyfriend on a conference call with the brothers. "How many pull-ups can you do?" he asked the poor guy. "How many push-ups?"

Exasperated with the answers, Brendan said, "Well what can you do?"

When Brendan went on dates with his future wife in Annapolis, Travis often tagged along. The roommates split the cost of a guitar and taught themselves to play, albeit not very well. Travis' greatest hit was an improvised goof called "Orange Sherbet." At other times, they might sit together in silence and suddenly burst into laughter at the same moment.

"It was almost like they could read each other's minds," Janet Manion says.

Peers regarded Travis as the more philosophical of the two. His classmate, Mathews, remembers walking into his room and finding a plastic box full of notecards, each with a quote that had struck Travis as meaningful. He became fascinated with the ancient fighting Spartans and could happily pass a day watching the whole run of HBO's series "Rome" in the family basement.

"Every movie he watched, any book he read, any girl he met at a bar, he tried to take some kind of learning lesson from it," Mathews says.

When talking about Brendan, classmates often resort to expletives to convey their awe at his physicality and determination.

"Whatever was put in front of him, he always just did it," Mathews says. "He was very stoic, but he had a presence about him. He did not want to surround himself with people who weren't trying to do their best."

Neither wanted to be on sidelines

Brendan's Navy football career stalled when a new coaching regime came in. So he turned to lacrosse, a sport he had barely played. It's extremely unusual for a novice to have any shot at playing for an elite lacrosse program, but the challenge thrilled Brendan. He didn't mind practicing rudimentary skills like throwing a ball off the wall and catching it with his stick.

Former Navy coach Richie Meade unreservedly calls him the toughest kid on the team, a fast bundle of muscle who would fly in after the faceoff and obliterate a key opposing player. He did just that against No. 1 Maryland his senior year, setting the stage for a Navy upset.

"It was a rough game, and he was the roughest guy on the field," Meade recalls. "You just felt good going in, knowing that Brendan was on your team and not the other."

Brendan played extensively his senior year, when his brothers were also both on the team. Together, the three

Looneys helped take the Midshipmen to the **NCAA** championship game.

"He was the real deal," Meade says. "Everything that, as an American, you would want this institution to instill in a leader, Brendan Looney was all of that."

Travis, meanwhile, wrestled in the 184-pound weight class for Navy. Though he lacked elite quickness and flexibility, he built enormous strength in the weight room and was rising in the national rankings when he hurt his shoulder as a junior. Surgery and rehabilitation never got him back to where he hoped.

"He went through a grieving process with it, wanting to do more, getting angry and then reaching acceptance," says Navy wrestling coach Bruce Burnett. "He got to the point where he said, 'If I can't do this, what can I do?'"

For the Army meet his senior year, Burnett asked him to go through the ardors of dropping weight so he would be eligible to wrestle even though he would not actually compete. By putting Travis in the lineup, Burnett forced a strategic switch in Army's lineup that ultimately helped Navy win. Travis made the effort without complaint, though he was too hurt to train off the pounds easily.

The mentality that made Brendan and Travis similar as athletes also informed their approach to service after graduation in 2004. Both wanted to make a difference in battle as soon as they could.

"They were always players," Janet Manion says, drawing the connection between their athletic and military mindsets. "They didn't want to sit on the sidelines. It's who they were."

Travis chose to follow his father into the Marines. He aced officer training school and wanted to go infantry. Instead, much to his frustration, he was assigned to a logistics unit for his first tour of Iraq. His only real thrill was guarding a polling place when the reconstructed country held its first election.

"I don't want to say he was bored," his sister says.

"But he wanted to go on more missions," Janet Manion cuts in.

Brendan found his early years of service even more frustrating. He wanted to be a SEAL but couldn't because of his colorblindness. Instead, he was assigned to an intelligence unit in South Korea, where he lived his worst nightmare — sitting behind a desk analyzing data all day.

"You don't want to be a nose picker like I am," he told his brother Billy.

Salvation finally came in the form of a new waiver allowing colorblind sailors to enter SEAL training. Brendan would get to test his physical prowess the way he wanted. He began Basic Underwater Demolition (BUDs) training in the spring of 2007.

Dying the way he lived

The Manions have zeroed in on one conversation to illustrate the service ethic shared by their son and Brendan.

Travis was home on leave at a Philadelphia Eagles game with his brother-in-law, Dave Borek. As they approached an escalator at the stadium, his brother-in-law joked that he could shove Travis down in hopes that he might break an ankle and miss his next combat tour.

Travis turned with a serious look and said, "Dave, if not me, then who?"

He left for his last tour of Iraq the day after Christmas in 2006. This time, he would be embedded with an Iraqi unit in Fallujah, helping the soldiers learn to fight insurgents. Early in the tour, he told his dad, "It's pretty serious over here now."

At the same time, he relished bonding with the Iraqi soldiers he advised. He listened to tapes to improve his Arabic and helped build a new mess hall.

Last year, Tom Manion used his military connections to arrange a trip to Fallujah, where he met some of the Iraqis who served with Travis. They remembered staying up late with him to share philosophical talks about the mission.

"Manion was different," Tom remembers them saying. "He reached out to us and tried to build relationships. He cared about us as people."

Travis' reports grew more dire as his tour went on. During one conversation, his sister made a casual remark about his deployment being half over. "Just because I'm halfway doesn't make it any safer or easier," he said.

In March, a roadside bomb rocked his vehicle, leaving him dazed. But Travis, at 200 pounds plus gear strapped all over him, busted out of the wreckage and chased down the trigger man. His Iraqi peers wanted to execute the enemy, Tom Manion says, but Travis talked them into escorting the insurgent to prison. He posthumously won the Bronze Star for his actions that day.

The last time he spoke with his parents, his connection kept cutting off, but he kept calling back as if he had something important to get out.

"I don't know if the American people know this, but we're doing a lot over here," his father remembers him saying. "We're fighting every day in the streets, and we're making a difference."

"It was probably the most intense talk we ever had," Tom Manion says.

Janet Manion doesn't know why, but on the following Sunday, she invited a passel of friends and family to the house for a picnic. They planted flowers, kids played ball in the backyard and smoke poured off the grill. "It was almost like he called us together," she says.

She answered a ring of the doorbell and saw a uniformed man standing outside.

On patrol in Fallujah that day, Travis' unit had fallen into an ambush by enemy snipers. The citation for Travis' Silver Star says he pulled a wounded Navy medic from the line of fire, then emerged from cover again to pull a Marine to safety. He emerged one last time to lay down fire so his wounded comrades could be rescued. In that exchange, a sniper shot and killed him. He was 26.

Rob Sarver, another academy classmate, got the call on his cell phone as he and Brendan readied their gear for the start of SEAL training. "Something bad happened to Travis," the voice on the other end said.

"I had never seen Brendan emotionally upset," Sarver recalls. "But I could really tell it hit him like a ton of bricks. He just said very quietly and very stoically, 'This training means more now than it did before. We have to go back and continue fighting where Travis died.'"

Brendan listened to Travis' funeral on speakerphone in San Diego. He bawled in calls home to his mother and Amy.

He kept his vulnerability to himself during SEAL training.

The 14-month preparation amounts to consensual torture. The candidates run four miles uphill with 35 pounds of weight in their packs. They wade shirtless into chilly water and then do hundreds of calisthenics in the rough sand. Nothing slowed Brendan. He performed so well during "Hell Week" that fellow trainees rechristened it "Camp Looney."

"In the two-mile swims and the four-mile runs, there was just no comparison," Sarver says. "Brendan physically

crushed them."

As soon as Brendan came home from training, he drove to Pennsylvania and sat at the Manions' basement bar, crying and telling stories about Travis. The night before 120 people ran the Marine Corps Marathon in Travis' honor, Brendan spoke to them with tears in his eyes about how much he loved his roommate.

Together again

Brendan loved being a SEAL lieutenant — the crazy rigor of learning to ride a horse or a dirt bike so he'd know how to do it on covert missions.

"The more strength and the more skill it took, the more Brendan enjoyed it," says his uncle, Chris Parker.

In a company of tough men, he represented a rugged pinnacle that others aspired to reach. If he ate fish one night, they ate fish. If he took two scoops of veggies, they took two scoops. He cultivated a wilder look, letting his hair grow long and his beard fill out. His college lacrosse coach, Meade, joked that when Brendan returned to campus, younger midshipmen stayed a step back from him, as if Thor had entered their locker room.

Brendan first served a tour in Iraq and then deployed to Afghanistan on March 9 of last year. He sounded happy on calls home, though he couldn't say much about his covert missions. In typical fashion, he complained that his unit could be doing more. As the end of his five-year commitment neared, he signed on for another five.

Brendan's tour was almost over when he hopped on the helicopter in late September. A replacement SEAL team had arrived in Afghanistan, and back home, his mother was making plans with Amy for a visit to San Diego, where the young couple lived.

The accidental crash that day killed nine servicemen, including Brendan. He was 29.

Eighty people, including the Manions, drove to Delaware to greet his casket. Those who loved Brendan struggled with the idea that he was the one coming off the plane that September day. He had seemed so indestructible.

"To see a coffin come out with a flag on it and know that's Brendan Looney, it's tough," says Meade, his former lacrosse coach. "I said to my wife on the way back from Dover, 'Brendan would have been a better father than me.' I'm never going to be the same."

In the days of mourning that followed, Brendan's mother, Maureen, often sought Janet Manion for a hug. "I don't want

you to leave," she told Travis' mother. "You're the only one who knows what this feels like."

As it happened, the Manions had felt misgivings since burying Travis near their home. Before his death, he had told several people he wanted to be interred at Arlington. His sister had pushed her parents to move him. Now, Amy Looney was saying that her husband and Travis belonged together.

Cemetery officials said they could not hold a spot next to Brendan but said the roommates could be side-by-side if the Manions acted quickly.

"It just felt like the right thing to do," Janet Manion says.

So one burial became two.

Marines, SEALs and friends from as far back as elementary school poured in to pay their respects and tell the families stories of how Brendan and Travis had touched them. The SEALs sported fresh tattoos of skeletal frogs adorned with Brendan's initials.

Many shared the same solace, that both men died doing what they were meant to do, that both lived according to the principles they shared.

"It's the old Braveheart thing," Mathews says. "Would you rather die in bed many years from now or would you rather give your life for something like freedom?"

The Looneys endured the pain knowing that their other two boys would be back to Navy service a few days later, Billy as a supply officer at the academy in Annapolis and Steve as an intelligence specialist in San Diego. "We all still believe in what they and Brendan were fighting for," says Maureen, wearing a bright green Navy T-shirt.

Erin Looney says her brother was drawn to tight communities in which he felt a powerful common purpose. She knows that whenever she visits Brendan's marble headstone, she'll see Travis to his right. The pilot of the helicopter in which he died is buried to his left.

"Even when he's gone, he's got this tight crew around him," she says. "He has his guys with him."

childs.walker@baltsun.com

Memorial Day ceremony

Brendan Looney will be among nine fallen servicemen honored in the annual Memorial Day ceremony at Dulaney Valley Memorial Gardens. The ceremony, open to the public, is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. in the Circle of the Immortals. The nine honorees are the servicemen with Maryland ties who have been killed in action in the last year.