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Remembering a Marine who'd always 'step up'

By Larry King and Tom Infield, Philadelphia Inquirer

May 1, 2007

Travis Manion, 26, a Marine who grew up in Bucks County, became a three-sport star at La Salle College High School, and was serving his second tour in Iraq, was killed Sunday near Fallujah.

His father said Manion died in an afternoon sniper attack. A first lieutenant in a reconnaissance battalion, Manion was embedded with Iraqis, helping to prepare them for assuming full defense of their nation.

"He was always a kid who would step up, no matter what he was doing," Thomas Manion, a colonel in the Marine reserves, said yesterday. "He was working so that the Americans could pull out and let the Iraqis take over. He knew he was on the front line, but he wanted to be a part of that."

La Salle High School officials, who learned of Manion's death Sunday night, announced it to the all-male student body at 8 a.m. yesterday. Students heard the announcement over the intercom in their home rooms, then paused for a moment of prayer.

A 2004 graduate of the Naval Academy, Manion had most recently left for Iraq on Dec. 26. He had visited his parents in their Doylestown Township home just before departing.

"We weren't so comfortable with him going back on his second tour," his father said, "but he was always telling us it was fine, and he was doing what he wanted to do. He felt if he didn't go, somebody else would have to. He always cared about others more than himself."

Manion was born on a Marine base, when his father was stationed in North Carolina at Camp Lejeune. The family settled on a wooded road in Buckingham Township when he was 10. The boy attended Linden Elementary School and Hoicong Middle School before enrolling at La Salle in Wyndmoor.

Listed at 6-foot-1 and 195 pounds, Manion was a top-notch athlete at La Salle, where he was a member of four teams - one in wrestling, one in football and two in lacrosse - that won Catholic League championships. He was named "all-Catholic" in each of those sports.

Also an exceptional student, he had a 3.7 grade-point average at La Salle, school spokesman Chris Carabello said.

As the flag flew at half-staff, friends and family flocked to Tom and Jannette Manion's home yesterday, remembering a young man they described as "everybody's brother."

"Travis always thought about the bigger picture," Tom Manion said. "That's part of why he wanted to go to the Naval Academy and then signed up as a Marine officer. The kid had a really big heart."

Manion was courted by several colleges, among them the University of Chicago. But by then, he was so bent on the Naval Academy, his mother said, that he secretly never submitted the applications and the checks she wrote for the other prospective schools.

"I found them stuffed in his bureau drawer" when the Manions moved to their current home a few years ago, Jannette Manion said.

Joe Colistra, his football coach at La Salle, was among numerous longtime friends and mentors to whom Manion sent an e-mail from Iraq on April 16.

"I feel good about our mission, and I feel good that my guys, my battalion, are committed to the mission," Colistra quoted the e-mail as saying.

Colistra recalled Manion as all determination on the football field, where he played fullback and defensive line. On offense, he mostly blocked and caught passes in the flat, but when he ran the ball, he charged straight on.

"He was rock hard," the coach said. "He did what he was told all the time. . . . And we won the championship with him at fullback."

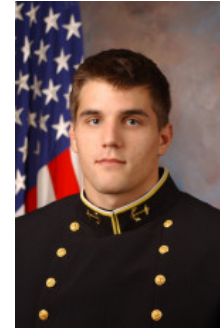
Football wasn't even his best sport, nor lacrosse. Wrestling was tops for him and he continued to wrestle in college, where he was nationally ranked before suffering an injury his senior year, his parents said.

Nick Onufrak, a La Salle wrestling teammate, recalled a good-hearted guy who loved to make a joke.

One day, he said, Manion forgot his wrestling socks and had to wear his street socks, drawing everyone's laughter. From then on, Manion wore street socks on the practice mat.

"He was always cracking jokes, doing something funny," Onufrak said.

At Annapolis, Manion was "loud and boisterous and funny," said Navy Lt. (j.g.) Lincoln Lukich, president of the 2004 class there. But he was also "bullheaded" and serious about his ambition to become a Marine officer, said Lukich, who expected "quite a few" of Manion's classmates to attend his funeral Saturday in Doylestown.



Travis Manion

As they made arrangements yesterday, Manion's family still knew little of his final moments, apart from a general e-mail and a follow-up call from the wife of his major in Iraq.

"He was shot by a sniper and had a chest wound, even though he had all his protective gear on," his father said.

A group of Marines on foot with Manion was ambushed. A military doctor was shot first and critically wounded, Tom Manion said, and "an all-out battle ensued. They were supposedly down to their last round of ammunition before a unit came in and pulled them out of it."

"I don't know in what part of that Travis got hit," he said. "But knowing him, he was right in the middle of the mix."

The father, who served 11 years active-duty, was asked if the family had any regrets about their son going to Iraq. He shook his head firmly.

"None," he said.

A viewing will be held from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Saturday at Reid and Steinbach Funeral Home, 2335 Lower State Road, Doylestown. A Mass of Christian Burial will be said at 2:30 p.m. at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, 235 E. State St., Doylestown, with interment at Calvary Cemetery in West Conshohocken to follow.

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