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THE MAGAZINE

War and Remembrance

A father retraces the steps of his son, a gallant Marine who lost his life in the liberation of Iraq.

JUN 12, 2010, VOL. 15, NO. 38 • BY [MARY KATHARINE HAM](#)

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Baghdad



Of all the men I met in Baghdad, Colonel Ali Jafar most looks the part of a senior Iraqi officer. A large salt-and-pepper mustache lends him authority—as if he needed it at 6'6". He rests a long arm comfortably against a stack of sandbags at least as tall as I am. Clad in desert camo, cigarette ever-present, he has the calm confidence of one accustomed to command.

We are standing in the expansive marble and sandstone portico of Saddam's Al-Faw Palace on Camp Victory with two American Marines, and the conversation has turned to old war stories.

Ali is suddenly animated, pulling his right pant leg halfway up his calf to reveal a gunshot wound he got in the first Gulf war. "U.S. Army," he says, pointing to a brown-gray scar on his shin the size of a quarter and grinning widely. Lieutenant Colonel Joel Poudrier, who served with Ali in Fallujah in 2006 and 2007, has seen this before.

"You know how he knows it was the Army?" Poudrier asks. "Because the Marines wouldn't have missed."

Another American, Colonel Tom Manion, USMC (Ret.), who is holding a lit cigarette he never smokes in his right hand, chuckles along with Ali. He too bears scars.

Three years ago, Manion's son, First Lieutenant Travis Manion, was killed in action by enemy sniper fire in Fallujah.

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No less than Colonel Ali, Travis was an archetypal military man. A broad-shouldered athlete with a quick smile, he was born at Camp Lejeune and graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy before serving two tours in Iraq, his first during the national elections of 2005. In Fallujah he was on supply duty but eagerly went out on raids, teaching his Iraqi counterparts as part of a Military Transition Team (MiTT). When the Iraqi soldiers with whom he served are asked about him, they use the word "warrior."

He was pulling wounded Marines out of the line of fire and fending off an enemy ambush when he was fatally wounded—displaying "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity," as his Silver Star commendation has it.

I've known the Manion family for three years. I met them six months after Travis died, when 200 of his family members and friends came to Washington to run the Marine Corps Marathon in his honor. Travis had planned to run the race with his dad when he got back from Iraq. Instead, his father ran the race that day wearing two numbers. The official results say Travis Manion crossed the finish line at 4:19:39.

Back then, his mother Janet was barely able to speak at a pre-race dinner honoring Travis. This year, [www.weeklystandard.com/articles/war-and-remembrance](#)



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she virtually emceed the event. His older sister went from grieving her brother to leading a foundation in his honor. His father went from being a seemingly stoic, mostly silent, Gold Star father to a candidate for Congress in 2008, outperforming expectations in a tough Pennsylvania district and a bad year for Republicans, but ultimately losing to antiwar Iraq veteran Patrick Murphy.

Each member of the family has changed. Where they used to say "Since Travis . . . ," trailing off without finishing the sentence, they now say "Since we lost Travis," with affection and purpose. But beyond grieving, they've committed themselves to the mission Travis is no longer here to serve—the good of his fellow veterans, his country, and the people of Iraq.

So, three years after Travis's death, the father retraced his son's steps, walking into the cavernous belly of a C-130 on a sandy Kuwaiti night to fly to Baghdad. When he texted his wife and daughter from his cargo-net seat, a picture of Travis, smiling in the Iraqi sun under the full weight of his battle rattle, flashed on his BlackBerry screen, illuminating Tom's scuffed Navy Wrestling ballcap, acquired in Travis's academy days.

Travis was with him, as always, but this trip was less about the son than it was about the ideas for which he fought. It was not about overcoming the past, but gauging the future.

Travis died just at the moment when Anbar Province went from a killing field to an "awakening." There were more than 1,000 attacks in Anbar the month he arrived as part of an 11-man MiTT team attached to an Iraqi battalion in December 2006. By April, according to General David Petraeus's 2007 congressional testimony on the surge, that number had been cut in half, making the area safe enough for Defense Secretary Robert Gates to tour the week before Travis was killed.

When Travis was posthumously awarded the Bronze and Silver Stars, the deputy commanding general in Anbar, Lieutenant General John Allen, said, "He had a personal role in the liberation of Fallujah . . . and the shining example Fallujah has now become."

It was that personal aspect of the victory in Anbar that brought the nonsmoking colonel halfway around the world to share a smoke with Travis's fellow soldiers.

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