

Chapter 9 - Simply Patriotic

Noah (“To Mom and Dad”)

On my knees before the universe,
That I were that close
Kiss the stars would I,
To my thanks, be they the host,
As I throw my voice to the sky.

Shooting stars, evasive to most,
Like the eternally beautiful universe,
Two stars, by me, have stayed close,
Shedding light on my path with their verse.
Blessed am I, by stars possessed,
To whom I was but born their child.

Noah recovered from the “kick in the gut” of Ashley’s leaving for training in North Carolina by staying on the phone with her on and off for the next two days; we felt honored to be in the presence of positive leaders of America. We couldn’t help overhearing how they encouraged each other. Ashley kept telling Noah how proud she was of him, and Noah was saying, “*Ashley, just pretend like I am in the next room. We’re gonna be all right and by the time I get back, you are going to be number one in your company.*” Ashley confessed that when his plane finally took off for Iraq, and he could no longer use his cell phone, she was able to relax, quit worrying about it, and start studying so that she *could* become number one, which she did.

Noah’s departure was really hard because we had been celebrating so much right up to the end. At Thanksgiving, Mikey Bramlett, Mike Jung, and Robbie Long had arranged a raucous party in Ellijay, all the details of which we will never know, but if the pictures give any indication, they had a *lot* of fun. Then we hosted “Turkey Day” at our house bringing our two families together for the first time. Christmas dinner was in Powder Springs at Ashley’s with more of her family. Organized and spontaneous celebrations erupted all over North Georgia throughout the holidays and through New Year’s, and of course they had to hit *The Red Door*.

We all had given ourselves completely to the exuberant, patriotic expression of love for God, country, family, and the happy couple; but, in those last two days, we began to feel the price tag on the flag of liberty: 9/11 had happened, we were in a war; and, with our blessings, our only son had chosen to bear the torch of freedom. It was our turn to say goodbye and as we have run our mouths all our lives about the strength that comes from American optimism and the confident courage that is made manifest when we allow a higher power to direct our destinies, we both knew that we weren’t going to make it harder by making it harder for him. It was simply our time to pay up and we were determined to honor the cost of freedom with dignity.

On that cold, starry January night/morning, under the frosty, eerie glow of street lamps, we piled Noah, with all his gear and his mug of green tea, into the car and drove toward Kelly Hill. With coffee from a doughnut shop in hand, we traversed miles of calm, well-kept post streets. It was a

quiet ride, but our communion was active, full of prayer and affirmation, an unforgettable moment of family love. Then we stepped out of the car and walked together toward a brightly lit, flickering hub of activity. Before we got there, Rick, knowing what was coming due to his Viet Nam deployment, pulled the three of us into the shadow of a big bush where we did our famous three-way hug and kiss—at least 13 of them. Our noses were red and we were shivering when we resolutely strode into the pool of illumination cast by the many spotlights only to be swallowed up by the overwhelming surging force of the night deployment, the clattering of equipment and weapons, echoing questioning shouts that demanded immediate answers, hollering voices filled with acronyms, and the athletic thudding of 120 pairs of desert boots charging up and down the linoleum hallways and stairs. With fluttering heart and shaky hands, Lucy got busy taking pictures of the Wolf Pack for the students. In the midst of the carnival atmosphere, we stopped and talked to Brigitte and Captain Bobby Toon. They both were so relaxed and genuine; the company commander, under the circumstances, seemed almost laid back, whereas his wife was upbeat, explaining to everyone about how to keep in touch. Lucy remarked, “He’s obviously experienced and tough and she’s got a website for disseminating information. Maybe this is no big deal.”

We followed Noah to his 3rd Platoon office/cubby hole and met the first sergeant of second platoon, SFC David Salie. Their tiny spaces were literally almost inside each other on Kelly Hill, home of the 3rd Infantry at Fort Benning. So here was this humongous first sarge, and he and Rick really hit it off, telling stories like old buddies. When Sergeant Salie talked about parachuting into Panama and going after Noriega, everyone paused to listen. His men were buzzing around, but Sergeant Salie took the time to stop and chat. He was what Noah called “squared away.” We did our best to memorize faces and names; Noah was calm and pleasant, smiling. Under his competent, peaceful exterior, there lingered just a shade of the demanding captain of the wrestling team and the enthusiasm of the cheerleader, but this was new; he stood tall as the leader of men who were going off into the unknown of a war zone that had claimed lives and captured negative headlines. His style was showing, nonchalantly busy the whole time, observing and greeting, introducing his parents. He looked so official when he signed “important” papers with Pvt. Fry’s dad. Like the big sarge, he took time to joke and pass the time of day with all the men in the whole company who kept coming by to pluck chocolate chip cookies from a big box that had been provided by folks like the ones in Ellijay who wanted to do whatever they could to make things more homey and warm.

Having seen Noah’s men in the many photographs he had sent home, it was exciting seeing them face to face. They were a balanced slice of young America; small to tall, they hailed from all parts of the nation and they were handsome, proud, brave. We shook hands with General Moore, the father of one of Noah’s men, Pvt. Ian Moore. We watched as he ceremoniously loaned Noah a special coin and told him that he wanted it back when Noah brought the platoon home safely. There was SGG Jimmie Brown in his slippers. He said it was going to be a long flight and he wanted his feet to be comfortable. Noah hadn’t even packed any slippers.

Suddenly, it was time to go, the swarming activity more urgent; everyone was quick-time moving toward the exits. Lucy looked up at David Salie, and said, “Sarge, when you go into battle, I want you to make sure that Noah is *behind* you.” He was so friendly and reassuring; he just smiled, “Don’t worry, Mom; I’ll take care of him.” It was such a comfort. David was

surrounded by his family, Deedy, Chyna, Lucas, and Hunter (a.k.a, Fat Baby); the love and support they shared was solid. Deedy kept giving Sarge a hard time because he was leaving her alone with three kids, but they were just the most beautiful Army family we had ever seen. He was tough, but she was tougher. We picked up our feet and flowed along with everyone else through the exits, stopping short as the company fell into formation. Tears were flowing and kids were calling, "I love you, Daddy!" There was no great fanfare because everything had been said. The celebrations were over; it was time to go, an order was given, and Bayonet Company marched away calling cadence that sounded so beautiful by the dawn's early light. We couldn't understand a single word, but it probably went something like this:

*I don't know why I left, but I must have done wrong
and it won't be long till I get on back home.
Got a letter in the mail, go to war or go to jail
and it won't be long till I get on back home.
Used to drive a Chevrolet, now I'm marching every day
and it won't be long till I get on back home.
Used to date a beauty queen, now I'm dating this M16
and it won't be long till I get on back home.*

Like parents have always done since the time of Betsy Ross, we unfurled a wall-sized American flag and waved it in the frosty air and marched along behind them until it hit us that it was time to stop. They weren't looking back; they were heading forward to "...the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air" with strength, courage, and time-honored camaraderie. Lucy said, "Now who are these people and where are they going with our precious gift from God?" We knew the Wolf Pack and Bayonet Company were headed for Iraq, but General Salazar had to fill in the gaps when we wrote to him.

General Steve Salazar

Bayonet Company of 2-69 Armor Combined Arms Battalion (B/2-69 CAB) was commanded by Captain Bobby Toon. The company was assigned to 2-69, but I cross-attached them to 1-10 Field Artillery Battalion which was responsible for Baqubah, to provide additional infantry combat power. Bayonet Company's specific responsibility was for the town of Buhriz. 1-10 was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rob Risberg. I was the Brigade Combat Team Commander and although assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division commanded by Major General Glen (Fuzzy) Webster, we were attached to Task Force Liberty serving as Multi-National Division-North Central, commanded by Major General Joseph Taluto, commanding general of the 42nd Infantry Division. The Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) commander and commanding general, XVIII Airborne Corps was Lieutenant General John Vines. The "Force," Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), Commander was General George Casey.

By the way, there is a great history in the 42nd. They were formed, deployed and fought during the First World War. General McArthur served as the Division's Chief of Staff in the 20's as a Colonel. Since they were formed from units across America, he said they were like a Rainbow--it stuck and the 42nd became known as the Rainbow Division. Their patch was a full Rainbow, but because they suffered 50 percent casualties in WW I, they tore the patch in half, lest they "Never Forget" their fallen comrades. The 42nd National Guard was the first to respond at ground zero with Major General Taluto in command of what became Task Force Liberty—he carried the name and "Never Forget" with him to Iraq and as they adopted us, Noah and the rest

of us were honored to adopt their motto--most of us wore the Rainbow patch as our combat patch when we served together.

Lucy -- The Big Sandbox

I am reminded of the rainbow decals we plastered all over the house when Noah was born exactly six months after Christmas. It seemed then as it does now that God's destiny was always upon our boy; he'd already traveled far and wide bearing the banner of his community and America to distant places. So it didn't surprise me that Noah and the Wolf Pack ended up serving under the chivalrous sign of the "torn" rainbow, headed toward a place on the other side of the world.

To My Wonderful Son (Dad's Letter to His Boy)

If you are reading this letter, you are on the plane and in route to Iraq. I know what you are going through right now and how you are feeling. I have been through the experience many times before. It does not matter how fierce a warrior you are, when you leave behind those you love, you can't help but feel a void in the separation. Here is a novel way of looking at this experience. What you are encountering right now is the pain of inter-dimensional travel. You are leaving one dimension of reality and entering another. This is a painful experience because of your attachments to the dimension you are leaving. This is quite normal as these attachments have been necessary for your personal development. In this dimension, you have had loving support, comfort, security, and a great deal of focus on yourself while you were growing. All of these conditions supported, enhanced, and expanded your self-perception. You have relied upon this support system to function in this reality.

When a person grows into adulthood, he is forced to let go of these supports. Many people come from dysfunctional families and do not have these supports so they don't have anything to let go of. If a person hangs onto their supports into adulthood, then these supports become crutches. Human nature does not want to let go of the supports and the comfort they bring, but the warrior knows that these must be set aside. The warrior cannot afford to have crutches; they only make him weak.

What makes it seem difficult and physically painful at this moment is that you are separating (physically) with this dimension of reality you know so well. You have become very attached to the people, the pleasures, and the support system of this dimension, as any normal human would, but now you have to make the necessary adjustments of moving from one dimension to another. This is your destiny. You have made these "hard" choices in order to gain personal strength, courage, leadership, and experience. This is just another link in the chain of experiences in your unfolding life and another link in a long series of lives.

You know you are totally capable of standing on your own without crutches. You are a warrior and a leader. You are entering a dimension of reality which will bring out talents, qualities of being, and depth of character that could never be realized here. This will truly make you a leader of men. You simply must accept and embrace your present conditions with an even mind and courageous spirit, regardless of how harsh the circumstances or how lonely you feel. It is your "body-mind and body-memory" that are attached to the ease, comfort, and security this dimension has given you which makes it hard to let go. The sooner you can understand this, the sooner the pain and knot in your solar plexus will go away.

I realize it is exponentially harder to let go of the people you love, but here is the illusion of inter-dimensional travel...there is no separation between us, it is only bodies that separate. We are all together in breath, spirit, light, and love. If you simply close your eyes, get quiet, relax, and breathe deeply, you can breathe in the presence of any one of us or all of us. We will be there energetically because we are all ONE, always. You just have to refocus your attention away from the world, the ego-personality, and the body's illusion of separation. You do this by going within to the stillness of your

Selfless Self (in your heart of hearts) where Oneness always resides. It is on this "level" that you can truly feel the presence of others or the presence of the Christ light.

When you return from this journey, it will be as another person. You will see the world differently because your perspective will be greatly expanded. You will be more capable, mature, and courageous. You will value your life and the opportunities it offers more than ever before. You will be able to dream bigger, accomplish more, and stand as a self-sufficient being. Fully embrace this new dimension of reality and remember, even though we may be separated on the physical, energetically and spiritually we are ONE!

I love you with all my heart. You are the perfect son to me...someone I have always been proud of and someone who has inspired me to become a better person, so you could be proud of me. We can have no regrets as we move forward in this life. We have loved and appreciated each other to the fullest, so we must all, in this present moment, give thanks for all we have been given and like the true warrior would say, "It has been a great ride and in this moment, I am at peace." I love you, Dad

In an interview with Dr. Stallings that aired on ETC-3, Noah talked about the trans-Atlantic trip, from Atlanta to Newfoundland, to Ireland, to Hungary, and then on to Kuwait. Traveling for forty hours and hurtling forward nine hours into time, Bayonet Company 2-69 finally landed near Camp Doha where most troops went immediately to bed and slept for the better part of two days. According to *Wikipedia*, Camp Doha is situated north of Kuwait City and has been a major U.S. base since the first Gulf War. It is a safe oasis and shares many of our democratic values. The local populace recently voted women the right to cast a ballot by amending Kuwait's electoral law.

The Army uses a former industrial warehouse complex which was converted to an installation after Kuwait's liberation from Iraq in 1991. The base provides a forward command and control headquarters capable of rapid expansion to execute joint, combined, and coalition combat operations. It's where many of the troops deploying to Iraq lay over for training and completing final preparations before entering the war zone. Once we knew that Bayonet Company was there, we started checking the e-mail morning, noon, and night. During his first call, Noah was in high spirits and he couldn't believe that everybody was sleeping so much. He said he was "*too pumped.*"

Noah (ETC-3 interview with Dr. Mark Stallings)

It was fun getting on a commercial plane with stewardesses, packing knives, street batons, and my M-4 machine gun. My troops had a lot of fire power, automatic weapons and so on.

Ashley (Early January, first e-mail)

Hey Lucy, I talked to Noah and he said that he didn't think his emails were going through to you. I am forwarding this one to you. It looks like he sent it to the right address so I don't know what's going on ??? Anyway, have a great day and I'll see you soon! Love ya, Ashley

Noah (e-mail forwarded from Kuwait, Hey folks!)

I love you guys! Matters of business first... If you look on aafes.com, you can find heart rate monitors. They will also ship for free to apo, ae addresses. I think I am going to need you to send me my computer. I'll give you the final word once I get there, but my laptop is not going to cut it. Well, no news other than we are heading out soon (to Ba'Quba). I've adjusted pretty well to being here. It is starting to feel normal for me. I have been meditating and I seem to reach great levels here. I don't know if it is the environment or situation, but it is great. The time is passing very quickly right now, partly because you lose track of the days when there is no

weekend. Days of the week are for wimps. Real men work 24/7. Ha Ha!! Well I don't really have too much to report. The days are pretty routine. I have been getting in the gym pretty frequently. Awesome. Let me know how everything there is. Send my love to everybody. I don't have Kym's e-mail. I love you. YMETM (You Mean Everything To Me), NCTU (Nothing Compares To U), 13 hugs, YAMSS (You Are My SunShine), Hooahh!!!! With all my heart Noah

Noah (e-mail to Lucy and Ashley, January 30, 2005)

Hey Woman (his greeting to Ashley)! Sorry I had to write you both in the same letter, but these slow computers and time limits are killing me. I love you so much. Ashley, you da bomb, YMETM. Mom I am going to be taking cash out of my account this next pay period. I love you! Iraq elections today! FRREEEEDDOOM!!!! YMETM

The Iraqi voters who had dragged Saddam's statue to the ground almost two years prior were finally getting their chance to speak, and they proudly displayed their ink-stained fingers in defiance of the insurgency. In a demonstration of solidarity, U.S. Senators Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson and many of their colleagues stained their fingers as well. In an address to the United States Senate, Senator Isakson captured the moment for history: "Our sons and daughters have been there steadfastly to fight the insurgents, secure the Iraqi people, and give this chance of liberty and freedom flame a chance to grow and to glow. For us to stay is for liberty and peace and freedom to take root, to grow and to prosper and for an area in the world that for all time has been in turmoil to have a chance for future time to be in peace... it was terrorism that drug us into the Middle East. It is terrorism through insurgents that we fight today in Iraq. And it's terrorism that will lose not in the end to bullets but to votes of people free to self-determine their future as the people in Iraq did when they began that process on January 31."

Before the vote we cringed at the reports on all the major news stations. Insurgents loudly vowed to disrupt the elections and "wash the streets" with the blood of voters, but the Iraqis turned the tables, showing their courageous mettle and hunger for a voice when they braved the trademark attacks of suicide bombers, car bombings, and random rocket shelling; 98.8 percent of the more than 5,000 voting centers opened with a voter turnout estimate that ranges from 70 to 80 percent. The Iraqi people spoke loudly and, riding the celebratory crest of a wave of hope for democracy, the soldiers of Bayonet Company made their way from Kuwait to a location 35 miles northeast of Baghdad to their new home, Forward Operation Base Gabriel, better known as FOB Gabe. Its homepage on the Web says it had been occupied by Saddam Hussein's 41st Armored Brigade of the Republican army. The base was first named Camp Boom because of the many loud explosions that occurred during the spring of 2003. By November, 2003, it was called "Camp Gabriel" or "Camp Gabe" in honor of Sergeant First Class Dan Henry Gabrielson, from the 652nd Engineer Battalion (Reserves), who died July 9, 2003, as a result of hostile fire in Ba'Quba while traveling in a convoy. Noah and his men just called it the FOB. To them it was inside the wire, a welcome haven after missions outside the wire in Ba'Quba

Baqubah, Ba'qūbah; also spelled Baquba and Baqouba and Ba'Quba

Ba'Quba is the capital of Iraq's Diyala Governorate. The city is located on the Diyala River, a northeastern tributary of the Tigris River. Just outside Iraq's so-called Sunni Triangle, the ancient site has been inhabited continuously since pre-Islamic times as a center for agriculture and commerce. The name is thought to have come from the Assyrian language Baya 'quba, meaning "Yacoub's (Jacob) house." With 240,000 inhabitants, this well-known way station on the medieval Silk Road for centuries has been the center of Iraq's commercial orange groves, agricultural produce, and livestock.

The groves are a place where Noah and his men spent a lot of time; the tall saw grass and the palm trees provide plenty of areas in which to hide insurgents and their weapons. Ba'Quba is one of the "hot" spots of Operation Iraqi Freedom because it is a mixed community composed of Iraqi Shiites and Iraqi Sunnis as well as the foreign fighters who mix in with the population. The Shiite and Sunni communities formed as a result of a division that occurred after Muhammad died 1,400 years ago. Although the two tribes of Iraqis have intermarried and mostly have coexisted peacefully, sectarian differences, religious practices, and traditional customs were exploited during the rule of Saddam Hussein to control and suppress certain populations. About 60 percent of Iraq's population—of some 25 million—are Shiite, with Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds making up roughly 40 percent.

Noah said on the phone, *"It will take time for the people to recover. What they've been through for the last twenty-five years is hard to imagine. We gotta do what we can."* It's complicated, and Noah and his men had to work really hard to determine if the people walking out of the groves were farmers from Buhriz or insurgents who wanted to thwart the fragile freedom.

Buhriz, Buhritz, Bahriz

Buhriz is an Iraqi town with a population that is about the same as Gilmer County, 40,000. Just as Ellijay is on the outskirts of Atlanta, Buhriz is located 25 miles north of Baghdad and 6 miles south of the major city of Ba'Quba. Like Ellijay, the town of Buhriz is heavily agricultural, located on fertile land along the Diyala River and engaged in the cultivation of date palms, orange trees, and other crops. It maintains a rural character despite its proximity to Ba'Quba and Baghdad, with many residents living in traditional mud huts or concrete-block houses. The town was known under the regime of Saddam Hussein as the home of many members of the Ba'ath Party, as well as for being particularly conservative with traditional religious and tribal values predominating. Following the fall of Hussein in 2003, Buhriz emerged as a flashpoint for insurgents opposed to coalition troops and their Iraqi allies.

1LT TJ Grider

I met Noah at FOB Gabe when his unit replaced my unit. I didn't know him long, but he impressed me greatly with his enthusiasm to accomplish the mission and take care of his soldiers. I fought many battles in Buhriz myself, and I know that Noah wanted to be there to make a difference in one of the worst places in Iraq.

Knowing that Noah was still in Kuwait, we only felt a little anxious; but Ashley and Rick and I kept up with the news and were on the phone constantly, passing information back and forth. Noah mainly phoned or e-mailed Ashley, and then she would call us. He had turned his finances over to Mom and Dad because at the time, we thought the least we could do was maintain his infrastructure as a way to help him from the home front. All through the years, he was forward and we were support. We didn't want him worrying about anything but his game plan while he was in danger.

There were often big gaps in our communication because he would be on the move or operating out of a training site that had no Internet or phone service. He always tried to let us know, but sometimes that was impossible. So we would call back and forth. "Have you heard anything today?" "No! What's going on?" Then, an e-mail would come through that we passed around the family. We had our own e-mail and phone tree. Lucy's students would come in and tell her what they knew because many of them had established good e-mail procedures with the guys they had adopted. Sometimes they'd say, "Teleki says to tell you your boy is okay," or "Ski says to tell

Ashley the LT loves her.” We hung our hearts on every word we heard and sometimes, when the media coverage was really negative, we had to practice obdurate perseverance to keep our emotions in check. Even when events would seem to calm down for a few days, none of us could sleep well; we were just too full of adrenaline. It got pretty stressful in early February when a week went by with no word; we knew in our hearts it was because the Wolf Pack was on its way into the war zone. Our imaginations were filled with images of dusty roads and the burning wreckage of vehicles torn apart by mortar attacks.

Noah (e-mail, February 7, 2005)

Hey Guys, made it to Iraq. I am great. I love you. Internet might take a couple weeks. Will call asap. YMETM, 13, and garlic farts for authentication. It is great getting your letters. Sorry my letters are so short. I'll send you some better ones when I get internet in country. I love you guys. I get more and more inspired the more I hear about the success of the election. Hah! We are doing some good! Pop, I got your message (extensive e-mail about enemy's changing strategy). There have been very few complex attacks such as that here. Supposedly, there are very few insurgents left. There are the occasional car and roadside bombs, but as far as big numbers of insurgents, I do not think there are more than 50 in this whole city and they are not operating together. Thanks for the intel. I love you guys so much! YMETM. Noah

Rick checked the Internet and media sources every day about enemy strategy and he constantly forwarded the information to Noah. We were still the positive team we had always been, and we knew that, one way or another, we'd get through this together. Also, we had the help and prayers of Ashley, our families, Lucy's students, our friends, Noah's college classmates, and lots of people we'd never met; everyone in our lives was focused on Noah and democracy in Iraq. We couldn't go anywhere without someone asking about the Wolf Pack and what they could do to help.

Mom—February 14, 2005—The Blackout

And then it happened. No phone calls, no email, a “blackout” means someone is down, and communication is cut off in the effort to shield the families of the fallen. It happened so fast; Rick and I knew they were in Iraq and that it would take a while to establish communication, so we weren't worried. They had just been there for a few days. I remember thinking, “A black out? What's a black out?” Before I had a chance to worry about it, Noah was on the phone at 4:30 a.m. telling me, “*Mom, I'm OK. It's Sergeant Salie; he's gone. Randy Taylor's gonna make it, but he's hurt pretty bad.*” Instantly, tears streamed down my face. I just couldn't believe it, the cost of war. I had prepared the students in the Adopt-A-Troop project, “We have to be brave because someone could get hurt.” But I had just met the gloriously tough, battle-seasoned warrior. He had seemed confident and invincible. I struggled to find courage, but I'm sure Noah could tell my voice was shaking when I asked, “Honey, what can we do to help?” He quietly reassured me, “*Just keep praying for us; and tell everyone not to worry. We're not under attack. It was just an unlucky fluke.*”

Joe Galloway (02/16/05, Military.com, “Farewell to David Salie, the Best of the Best”)

All of America should join me in mourning the death Monday of Sgt. 1st Class David J. Salie. Sgt. Salie was killed on Valentine's Day on a mean street in the Iraqi city of Baqouba, and I'm grieving the loss of my friend along with his wife, Deanna, and their three children... He was earnest, straightforward and sincere. He remained in our Army for all the right reasons... David was in B Company, 2nd of the 69th Armor, 3rd Infantry Division. He was 34 years old—an Army

brat born in Columbus, Ga., the home of Fort Benning and the home of the infantry. He grew up in Columbus and at posts all over America and the world.... On Monday, Feb. 14, he and others of 2/69 Armor were being given a familiarization ride around the city. David was in the backseat of a Humvee, fourth in line in the small convoy. Someone detonated an IED—an improvised explosive device—just as the fourth Humvee came along. David took the brunt of the explosion and was killed instantly. The sergeant (Randy Taylor) in the front right seat was badly injured, but survived.

Noah (retrospection to Christy Lindstrum on the death of David Salie)

The toughest thing that has ever happened to me in my life. In our company, Sergeant Salie "walked on water" so we are very open and cried, but we can't spend a lot of time resenting, getting stuck because Sergeant Salie really believed in this fight. For him, we gotta suck it up and keep driving on, and remember we have someone looking over us.

Shakespeare (*Henry V*)

From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother.

We Will Be Brave! WWBB (Sun, 20 Feb 2005)

Family and friends were lighting up the airwaves with e-mails and listening for the phone to ring. It was like a 9/11 shock all over again, but we were determined to stand tough. Winston Churchill warned of the complacent climate and conditions of the time of peace after World War I leading up to World War II: "The malice of the wicked is reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous..." We were not going to let fear or sadness sap our unified strength. We were determined to re-double our support for Bayonet Company. We took up Sgt. Salie's "Drive on!" as our motto.

Mom to Noah (Feb. 20)

Hey Honey, we're all praying for Sergeant Salie's family and I'm baking cookies for my Wolf Pack - choc chip and p-nut butter. They should be there in a couple. Dad's got us listening to the history of terrorism (on CD). We are so proud of you. We are hearing they caught one of Big Z's (Zarkawi) guys in Big B (Ba'Quba). All right! The only way to fight terrorism is to hunt it down and be good to the innocent people in the area. We've got boxes of crayons on the way. When I was buying them, Sonnija Owens, this nice lady at Wal-Mart, held my hand as she said a prayer for Sgt. Salie. We all want to help. If there is anything we can do, anything... let us know. Everyone is praying. God bless Ellijay's prayer chains. Keep writing in that journal. We'll put something special together when you get home, maybe a book. We saw the picture you sent Ashley (Valentine's). You are so cute! She loved it too. As always—you're on your feet and everyone around here is on their knees. Got your back, baby. YMETM, IDWIC, Mom, 13 Hugs! I smell cookies—I hope they are not burning! *<) Joshua 1:9 "Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid or dismayed: for the Lord is with you wherever you go."

Noah (Tuesday, February 22, 2005)

Hey momma. Thanks for being so supportive. I look forward to the cookies. I love you. YMETM. I'll write you a better letter when I get internet in my room.

When Sonniya wrote a song called “Freedom’s Not Free” in honor of Sgt. Salie, ETC-3 anchor Christy Lindstrum came to the school and did a story about the Adopt-A-Troop project and also videotaped Sonniya singing to the guys. It played locally and more people than ever got involved in the project. Everyone wanted to do something! It was a pretty tough time, but no matter how scary it was for us, we knew the men of the Wolf Pack were having it worse. Caller I.D. hadn’t been installed at our house so we answered all calls on the first ring. Because the Iraq/Georgia time zones were so different, a lot of times it was late at night. We would dash to the phone, rubbing sleep from our eyes; my heart would pound like a hammer against the walls of my rib cage. Though Rick was writing the final chapters of a book and I was teaching and finishing a specialist degree, it seemed like everyone I knew was focused on Noah. We were in the middle of a mighty support system and it wasn’t until later that we got some inkling of how harsh reality was for the guys. Tough as it was, true to his faith of “voting” for the future, Noah was in the planning stage of developing a leadership program.

"Reverend" Lee (SGG Freddie Dupree)

The platoon had just returned from a combat patrol in Buhriz and Tahrir. Of course it was a “hot” one. The sun was shining and it had zapped all of our energy. We were sweaty and we smelled bad. Our sixty pounds of protective gear—Army combat helmet, body armor, knee pads, eye protection, and can’t forget the gloves—had us feeling sorry for ourselves because the day before us was long and very demanding. The pressure of our non-stop missions and the heat level just had a way of carrying over to the next day how we felt and what we were dealing with. Nevertheless, this day seemed extra hot.

As I walked over to the LT’s room carrying a bottle of water, I could hardly breathe because of the heat. It’s like a hair dryer constantly in your face, and the power was going out all the time. We had to fight dust, spiders, and scorpions among other creepy crawlers. Then, if that wasn’t enough, there came the sandstorms, and, oh my, the flies! Nehemiah comes to mind when I think about the responsibility that comes with our uniform. Nehemiah was challenged with rebuilding the walls to provide security and safety for the people. In spite of opposition from the outside and from within during this period of sacrifice in which some lives were saved and some lives were lost, the huge demands were met and the task was completed. Our mission had the same demands and Noah and I shared a lot of time and conversations together talking about it, some good and some not so good.

His room was kind of dim because the lighting there wasn’t the best. He was hot also; he didn’t have his shirt on and I understood why. With 120 degrees, the A/C units could not perform well enough to keep the rooms cool. He sat on his bed while I sat on a folding Army stool. Before we even started to talk about the issue at hand, we got going about how “*hot*” we were and “*can it get any hotter!*” It was quiet in that area, I guess because officers don’t make a lot of noise. As we sat there talking, we were constantly wiping sweat from our bodies. It was a small room so a person couldn’t do that much moving around. It was uncomfortable, but as we began to discuss our leadership within the platoon, it was like I was sitting at the feet of King Solomon. The wisdom that was coming from his mouth was awesome. What he handed down to me on that day, I am yet using in my life.

Noah and I always talked about unity. We expected unity within our platoon, but not only that, we expected for the soldiers to know more than just their jobs. We wanted them to understand how to save money, how to invest money, the different types of insurance, etc. Lt. Harris was committed to developing a well-rounded soldier who would be able to survive and lead outside

the military. He felt it was his responsibility to be like Nehemiah and help the men build their defenses, inside and out, and he hoped to help the Iraqi people who seemed defenseless. If you want to look at an example for wearing the uniform and living it, you would have to look to Noah.

Noah (Written on a note card, found in his returned materials)

Be a man: Live the Army values. You can only give your integrity away. No one and no thing can take it from you. Be a model of what it is to be a professional and embody the Army values. Be a values based officer. Fight Justly. Stand up for what is right all the time. Be cheerful and optimistic in bad situations and good situations. Optimism will carry the day. Hold everyone to a standard of toughness and emphasize team. Look to the needs of your men first.

John Stuart Mill (“On Liberty”)

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by exertions of better men than himself.

We were all deeply saddened by the anomaly of the horrendous actions perpetrated by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib. It never should have happened, but it made me so mad to hear about it disproportionately over and over again when I knew that the vast majority of service personnel are people like Noah, SFC Salie, SSG Duprée, Cpl. William Long, and Pvt. John Chrzanowski, Americans of good will who rise every morning and live up to their vow to go above and beyond the call of duty, men and women who feel that even one atrocity is too many. Back in North Georgia, we kept the focus on supporting the troops because we knew that, for them, it was all about us and helping the Iraqi people. Our relationship was servant leadership in action, and I was so proud my students who had adopted troops understood that Noah and the Wolf Pack supported them as well as the Iraqi kids. Noah often spoke about how his men were sincerely interested in the kids and in some cases trying to give the high school students pointers about studying and friendship. In contrast to the sordid details exploited shamelessly by certain members of the news media, my students were seeing the best of America modeled. We all felt like we were “Spreading the love!”

Mary Grabar (Townhall.com “Love and War” Memorial Day, 2008)

...we rarely hear about the code of honor and chivalry that exists at its highest level in the U.S. military. This is a code that many Americans have adhered to as well in other areas of life, in the face of overwhelming societal pressures... I had the privilege of knowing such an American while in the graduate program at the University of Georgia and teaching freshman composition... Noah Harris... would bring in a B paper and ask how he could improve it... Noah always acted like a gentleman. When I told him during one conference that he was a good writer, he gave all credit to his mother for teaching him. Noah also was the cheerleading captain and used his athletic abilities to catch cheerleaders, who commented on his trustworthiness. They knew that he would hurt himself before he let one of them get hurt... a couple years ago...I learned about the path that Noah’s life took after he left my class. His photo in uniform graced the alumni magazine that came in my mail...One of the things that the article noted was that Noah had a special connection to children. He reached out to the children of Iraq and gave them soccer balls and stuffed animals.

Noah Harris, a Christian gentleman, scholar, and soldier, displayed his code of honor

everywhere--in the classroom, the football field, and the battle field. He is a fine representative of our military.

Noah's Wish

He and his men were known for the beanie babies, but he said, *"Mom, it's so cool. What the kids really want are pencils and paper. You know, for school. They just want to learn and catch up with the rest of the world. They're always saying, 'Sir, got a pencil?'"*

Mom (Beaniemail to Noah)

When I went to my mailbox this morning, a 1952 graduate of GHS who now lives in Va., but reads the *Times Courier*, sent 100 bucks to help with the project. Then, I opened up my e-mail and a guy who works for James Padgett has all his people just so fired up about sending you guys ...goodies! And THEN, I went to Wal-Mart to buy 400 pens to go with the 400 notepads that Larry Tankersly at RESA made for the Iraqi kids using scrap paper, and these 2 nice guys that work in sporting goods decided to buy you 4 volleyballs and a pump. And they all keep saying to me over and over again to please tell your son and his men that we love them and we need them and we appreciate what they are doing for us. After watching your intense movies (Ba'Quba dvd's), I know that probably doesn't cut ice, but I hope it helps to know that America has *your* back. It sure looks like you and your guys are a band of brothers. Uncle Po Po (New York uncle) called me last night and he says he thinks about you every minute. I could go on, but I know you are busy...And those children (Iraqi) - they just look so full of hope. You are building the world, baby, so please lift with your knees - commitment + sacrifice = a really special life! I LOVE YOU SO MUCH! You'd better stay with that IDWIC thing - it works! Mom, Joshua 1-9

Noah (e-mail to Chris Cornwell, Terry College)

Chris, Thank you for responding so quickly. Several of my soldiers are older and have been in the military for many years and would certainly appreciate your letters. My mother has pictures and the personal info of each of my guys...I cannot even begin to explain the importance of the letters they receive. The letters boost morale and also remind each of us soldiers what it is we are fighting for, the goal of freedom. All of the individuals who write and support their troops are serving their country more than they know. About the situation we are going to be facing. We will be arriving right before elections. It will be important for us to ensure the Iraqi people are confident enough to come out and vote. Once again, thank you for your support. With much respect, Noah

U.S. Senator Johnny Isakson (Noah's Iraq pen pal, from remarks delivered on the Senate Floor, 9/05/07)

....He was known as the Beanie Baby soldier... He led a platoon in Iraq, and he carried, in one big pocket on his right leg, bullets, and in another big pocket on his left leg he carried Beanie Babies, and he shared them with the Iraqi kids as he would go through securing and patrolling areas of BaQuba. His unit started carrying Beanie Babies and other good things for the Iraqi kids. While defending freedom and hopefully securing that country, he was also winning the minds of those children.

It was a beautiful thing and we all felt so blessed to have the opportunity to help. As part of the 75 percent of Americans who voted to engage the enemy in Iraq, we felt we were doing our part to rebuild the walls of security that had long been crumbling. To us, it didn't matter that the process was slow and painstaking. We can never reclaim the innocence that was lost, but we can

still do good. When my students had so sweetly volunteered to support forty men and try to provide them with encouragement, but also keep them in beef jerky, drinks, and personal items, I had worried about the cost and the shipping. I shouldn't have because everyone wanted to help, and Ms. Kathy Hyatt, Gilmer High School's amazingly compassionate finance guru, went out of her way to keep us solvent. When our hometown Wal-Mart gave us a safe place to stand and ask for donations, it was amazing; people saw the flags and the "Support the Troops" buckets, and they kept filling them up. Seeing such love flow from the community to support their project made a big impression on the students.

People started dropping money off at the school. One day, Mrs. Rogers gave me an envelope with \$500 and told me that the donor wished to remain anonymous because he wanted to keep the focus on the troops. Personnel at our post offices bent over backwards to help us with the shipping, and many times when customers were waiting to do postal business, they would become involved, donating money and helping to carry boxes. Could it get any better? Then, one night, my dad called and shared the story of the Emilys in Virginia. He had told his sister, my Aunt Liz, the story about how Noah and his men wanted Beanie Babies so they could offer the children of Ba'Quba a token of good will. Aunt Liz told her nine-year-old granddaughter, Emily, who told her good buddies, also named Emily, and together they launched "Operation Noah's Wish." It spread so fast and far that Noah got teased a lot because he had to take a detail with him to pick up the mail for the Wolf Pack. He assured us that he didn't care as long as it didn't stop him from making first lieutenant. It was awesome, simply American, a community in action for the world. Of course, it wasn't quite so easy on the other end of things.

Noah (ETC-3 TV interview with Christy Lindstrum)

We actually do combat patrols to get the enemy to attack us. If it's quiet, we go talk and give Beanies to the children. When we start handing out gifts, it spreads like wildfire. It just lights up their day; it might be the only possession that the children have. It's great because we are trying to win over the children. I am blessed to be from Ellijay, Gilmer County, and all the opportunities I've had. The sense of community here is amazing and I've been many places in the world and I've never seen such a great place. Everything I am began here and is as a result of being from Ellijay.

Noah (e-mail 4/15/05)

Hey mom, Thanks for all you are doing back home. The way we are going to win over here is by winning over the people... We do what we've gotta do when we have to, but these kids will remember this when they get older. We're showing them that this war is a labor of love. I love you and Dad. Tell him thanks for sending the pics of the beanie babies to everyone so I don't have to. Please feel free to use my e-mail any time. I still have to write to that guy from the Kroger parking lot (James Padgett); he's really helping my men. We got big boxes of cd's, dvd's, and games. If you write him, tell him I am thinking of him. I love you. YMETM. Inshallah. That is an arabic word for "God's will" or "it is because of God." Inshallah, Noah

The Emilys and "Noah's Wish" (Chantilly, Va., Fairfax County News)

When **Emily Meiburg** and two of her friends—also named Emily—found out that Emily's cousin Noah was going to Iraq, they wanted to help. So, they started a project called "Noah's Wish" to help the kids of Iraq. Noah had told her that the IRAQI children had "*nothing to play with...*" and that they were scared of the soldiers, but once they had the Beanie Babies they were smiling.

Emily said, "Noah e-mailed me and said, '*I tell my men that if we must have bullets in one pocket, at least we can have Beanie Babies in the other...*' We got big green boxes to represent the Army and put a sign with 'Noah's Wish' on it and pictures he had sent us of some of the (Iraqi) kids. We set them up at a table at our school, and people would drop off the Beanie Babies. I was amazed at how many Beanie Babies we got (Over 1200)." **Emily Thoreau** said that it was terrific "because I know we are more fortunate than many other countries because we have freedom and democracy." **Emily Strait** said that they learned you can find a way for everyone to contribute in ways that really matter—and that everyone can make a difference, even if it's just a little thing.

Cousin Nancy (Beanie Babies from New York)

When I look at all the Beanie Babies, I realize that each one of them represents Noah. The funny looking bird represents his sense of humor. The tiger and the shark, his determination and fight. The koala for the kind and gentle person he is. The beaver for the busy beaver in him. The green bear for how lucky he makes everyone feel just to know him. Hope, the praying bear, for the beacon of hope that he is.

Captain Jeff Green (Special Ops)

Noah liked the way I worked and tried to work with me as often as possible. He wanted to learn everything he could. The time I first saw the Beanie Baby thing, we'd been on a raid out in the country (Ba'Quba), going house to house, arresting insurgents. Noah and his platoon were supporting my indigenous team by providing security. There were women and children everywhere. After we took care of business, Noah had his men take a knee, and I remember wondering what kind of gear they were getting out. The guys started pulling out Beanie Babies and had the translators explain what was going on.

Second Lt. Noah Harris (e-mail, Tuesday, June 07, 2005)

Dear Emily, I just wanted to take a minute to let you know that I am so proud of you for all you are doing for Iraqi children. Your beanie baby drive is just what we need to help us win the hearts and minds of the future leaders of Iraq... The children here have so few personal items that your beanie babies become cherished possessions and symbols of the good will of the people of America. My men and I are committed to helping bring a little joy into their lives and they are so appreciative. I will try to forward pictures of the children soon. Please tell all of your friends that all of your efforts do much to lift our spirits. I am so proud of you!

Noah's philosophy of philanthropy was being passed like an Olympic torch from us in America to little children in Buhriz. Noah told us it was worth it, and to me he was proving the validity of the notion that he often expressed, "*A problem is just an opportunity to grow in disguise.*" We shook our heads in bemused wonder sometimes, because we felt awed that a great idea was catching on and continuing to spread into an international mission of hope and love.

Bobby Toon (e-mail from Ba'Quba, Iraq)

A few days ago we were in a small village and I got to see our guys interacting with the kids and passing out Beanie Babies. I realized that Noah was not on the mission physically but he still was impacting our operations here. By the end of the day a man came forward and led us to a weapons cache. He told me after seeing how our soldiers treated his family with dignity and respect he felt compelled to help us.

Joe Young (ILA Scholar Inaugural Class)

...if I had to narrow it down to one trait that I will remember, it would be his charismatic personality. Noah was a friend to everyone. That impressed me most, his friendliness... He wasn't concerned with preserving his status... He went out of his way to make sure that everyone he encountered felt welcome at the table. He made everyone feel like they belonged... The positive influence he had is evidenced by the children of Iraq, children who are playing with the beanie babies that this American soldier gave to them... although he had never met them before, he loved them so much that he was willing to sacrifice... to give them freedom and a better future.

Lucy—I Do What I Can!

Noah always made his philosophy seem so easy, but Rick and I know how hard he worked at it, the hours he spent in arm-chair conversations, or reading books, and meditating on great inspirations. When trying to define himself, he'd laugh and say, "*Mama, Dad taught me to be a Christian Taoist.*" He was going to live his life like Christ because his goal was always to live the truth in the present moment to the best of his abilities and share the love of God with everyone he ever met. The Taoist part was to keep his body pure, clear, and in harmony with the forces of nature. In addition to sorting through his sticky notes, I still smile when I open Noah's books and find pages folded. Underlined in his Army-issue Bible was John 15:12-13, "This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend." In his pocket copy of the Tao Te Ching which came back with his Bible, this page was scored:

*The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to.
It is content with the low places that people disdain.
Thus it is like the Tao.
In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep to the simple.
In conflict, be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.
When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete,
Everybody will respect you.*

Sounds like a Mother Nature-servant-leadership meditation to me. Find yourself and then practice IDWIC. When I close my eyes, I can feel his hand on my shoulder. So many times we'd be talking, and I'd say, "Noah I'm so proud of your grades," and he'd humbly say, "*I do what I can.*" I'd say, "Night Train, that was a great game." He'd shrug and say, "*I do what I can.*" "Wow! You threw a diamond (a cheer leading formation in which Noah would hold three girls)!" "*I do what I can.*" When I said, "Son, I'm so proud that you are willing to serve your country," and he said, "*I do what I can,*" I finally got it. Light bulbs went off in my head. "That's your philosophy. It's I.D.W.I.C." He just whispered, "*Ya think?*" I stared into his lovely, green eyes, noticed that his eyebrows had an ironic lift, and caught the unmistakable twitching at the corners of his mouth; and I had a flash. He was getting pretty smart; Pop Pop (my dad) might have said, "Maybe too big for his britches," but I realized he was teaching me in the best way possible, by example. IDWIC was his philosophy of leadership. So, when he called from

Ba'Quba one day to discuss the leadership program that he was putting together for the Wolf Pack, I started calling it IDWIC and he never tried to stop me; it started to take root quickly.

Lt. Matt Blackwell (ROTC buddy)

My Mom... just sent me an email and said that she has been teaching IDWIC to her classes. There is a coffee shop in Tennessee that has been sending toys and supplies for my platoon. I sent them a thank you letter and told them about Noah and IDWIC. The owner's son did a school project that had pictures of the Iraqi kids with the toys. He also included IDWIC.

Like a pebble dropped into a clear pond, Noah's idea that it would be good if we all do what we can every day, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, expanded like defined ripples in the water, first to my students, to UGA, to Virginia, to Washington, D.C., to New York, and then to Buhriz, Iraq. Noah and the Wolf Pack were doing their part to bring the water of freedom to a thirsty world, and their efforts were lighting the torch of honor at home.

Lucy Harris (e-mail, Wed, 02 Mar 2005)

Hey Man! Hearing from you just makes my day! I am so glad everything is going good and you are "swoll" (big from lifting wts). We are holding down the fort here. The 2000 is for your car. We gave David 100; I hope that is ok. He's going thru a financial crunch so we thought you wouldn't mind. We are getting ready to pay some big bills for you. Oh yeah! It feels good to see your debt get whittled down. Dad's working on the book, and I'm doing college and Beanie Baby madness! I do what I can! We're into a poetry unit, so you know I'm having fun. What a kick! I am gathering your materials from ILA for your leadership class. That is so cool. Your guys might not love going to class, but they'll know you are thinking of them in the long run. Oh yeah, I spend part of each day imagining what you are up to. Cpt. Toon wrote to one of the kids and told her to tell me that my "baby" was doing great. Does that mean you are the youngest? I loved it, but not as much as I LOVE YOU! YAMSS—Got any funny stories about the guys, like who eats the most, who burps the loudest, who tells the best jokes? I'll pass anecdotes on to the kids. They are so focused on you guys—You are so loved. You are my hero! Again, WAMH (With All My Heart)

Noah (e-mail, Wed, 02 Mar 2005)

Hey Momma, Thanks for writing. I am one of the youngest, but no big deal. It is great to hear from you. I have been writing in my journal. Only skipped a day or two, when I did not do anything but watch movies and lift weights. Chillin' while my PLT is out (training). We'll get back into things soon. I started writing a short essay on excellence. It is rough so far, but I'll still send you a copy. Thanks for the books. Sgt. Duprée and I want the leadership course to be heavy on mentoring and leading by example. When I get enough pics to fill a disc I'll mail it to you. I miss you a lot Mom and Dad. I love you guys so much. I am doing well and getting my swole on right now. I am learning a lot. You mean everything to me. NCTU. Nose

P.S. Of course I eat the most. You are my sun shine (YAMSS)! I love you!

Rick

At the time, life had a surreal quality for me because my two primary points of focus were so diametrically opposite. In the mornings, I was meditating and writing the final chapter of my book on Christian mysticism and meditation, and after finishing the daily chores around the homestead, I was cruising websites trying to find military intelligence on insurgent activity. I had been listening to and reading books on terrorism and insurgencies and realized from my time in

Vietnam (USMC) that the military tactics of an insurgency will evolve along a certain time line. I was keeping Noah posted on current al Qaeda enemy intel, news from around the world on Muslim extremism, and more than an occasional story about the **pathetic** lack of backbone and understanding about this war as well as the open divisiveness and anti-American sentiment expressed by many so called “Americans.” I remember them from Vietnam and I made up a brand new acronym just for them: KMA!

Although this appears in an earlier part of this chapter, I would like to restate it...I have it memorized.

“War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by exertions of better men than himself.”

Whether we like it or not, we humans have to make decisions in this third dimensional realm of consciousness in which we live, move, and have our being. The decisions in our world are mostly based on a perspective of duality: right-wrong, good-bad, favorable-unfavorable, profitable-unprofitable, and the most important are the decisions we make between lightness-darkness. Christ taught us to choose light and consequently, for the most part, America has become a values-based society with many of us trying to make decisions that represent the “high road” of life. And speaking for myself, this is a road I would vigorously defend because it represents standing up for the light and for the “greater good of humanity.” We Americans need to be clear in our values and our courage because in this world of man, anyone who can mercilessly kill thousands of our fellow citizens deserves to be dealt with firmly and decisively by a united people, one Nation under God. This is not the circumstance in which Christ teaches us to turn the other cheek. It is one thing to fight and terrorize people in order to destroy all life that opposes your point of view and another to fight in order to uphold individual liberty and the higher values of life even unto death. Noah was clear about his mission.

Back at the homestead, we were adjusting to a new paradigm that included a heightened awareness about global time. I would wake up at 3 a.m. and count forward nine hours and realize that it was high noon and hot as “hades” on the FOB or I would think about Noah at lunch and realize that he was on night patrol. But we were getting our hearts and minds around it and we all were totally focused on succeeding at the highest level in our support and prayers for our troops. At first, we were always sitting on “ready-ready” because we had no idea what was happening. As the e-mails started coming in, I realized his unit was getting oriented to the neighborhood and they would have time to acclimate. For me, I needed to settle down for the long haul or I wasn't going to make it through the campaign.

Noah was quickly learning that, even though he was in a war zone, there was still a lot of “down time” or what he called boring time. I remember Noah asking me to get out of storage the motivational and personal development courses I used in my training and consulting business. He said one of the reasons for developing the leadership course was that, aside from the roadside bombs, it was so calm in Ba'Quba the guys were getting a little bored. He said, “*I want them to keep their edge and be great in the military and in the outside world.*” He made life in a war

zone seem so normal because he kept the focus on the grander vision of life he had always embraced. Although he wasn't right in front of my eyes, I could tell how much Noah loved his first big job out of college and I knew he was itching for some action so he could finally take the fight to the enemy and get his combat arms citation.

Lucy Harris (e-mail, Mon, 21 Mar 2005)

Hello Sugarplum, Here's the news: you only have a balance of \$800 in your account because we have paid off quite a lot. Mrs. Rogers will take care of your taxes. Deedy will be on Greta Van (FOX) tonight at 10-6 am your time, so if you are in the cafeteria, tune in. Lots of boxes on the way. Have you gotten the peanut butter cookies? I hope they weren't too stale. Beanie Baby drive is going well. Mark Pettit is behind you. He's letting the guys off easy if they bring Beanies, so they are bringing in a lot. Spring break soon. I have to write 3 BIG papers, but I'm glad; anything to keep me busy. Dad is really working on his book, so it ought to be a blast. Ha ha! Knowing me as you do, do YOU think I could be an assistant principal? I trust you - tell me. Send us an anecdote about what's up when you can. Is it warm, hot? Favorite foods - games people play and so on. We ALL love you in Gilmer County and I spread the word when you write. WE LOVE YOU SO! Moms

Noah (e-mail, Wed, 23 Mar 2005)

Hey Momma, it is great to hear from you. I miss you. As far as becoming Assistant principal, if that is what you want to do. From my perspective, you would be a great candidate because you are fair and care about the students. But would you be able to directly influence the students as you do as a teacher? The way a school is set up reminds me of the army. A teacher is a platoon leader who is able to directly influence and lead the soldiers/students. I like my position because I am with the troops in the trenches. Being Assistant Prin. looks to me like the XO or Platoon Sergeant position. You don't get to influence what is going on at the front lines (class room). You provide supplies and punishment and do paper work. You, I think would make a great principal. A principal reminds me of a Company commander (like Cpt. Toon). You are in control of the teachers and indirectly influence the kids by making sure the teachers are doing their job and are effective. You could go from influencing 150 kids to a whole school, and probably bring Georgia schools up a level. Basically, do you want to finish your career teaching or administrating? You are probably one of the best teachers of all time. Instead of committing more time as a principal, maybe develop the YMETM teaching method by Lucy Harris. Make a textbook for college, maybe. That's my take. I am sending you a package; it will have a disc full of pics and lots of letters for your students from the guys and memorabilia. I am doing well over here. I love you so much. YMETM. NCTU. YAMSS, your son and best friend, Noah

Ashley (e-mail to Pop Pop)

Hi Pop Pop, I talked to Noah last night. He called and said he was well. He captured about 50 insurgents the other day, and seemed really excited. I know he's busy, but he sounds like he's doing great! It was good to hear from you and I'll keep you posted. Love ya, Ashley

Noah to Ashley to Lucy (forwarded e-mail)

Hey Baby, I just wanted to drop you a line and let you know that I am all right. I've heard Baqubah was on the news the past couple days. We have been running ragged. We did a mission today that lasted about 12 hours. It was really cool. We cleared 10 houses and detained about 50 people. We then went into the palm groves looking for weapons caches. We found some mortar tubes. I continue to learn more and more daily. I thought I was the man at keeping my cool under stress. I got pushed to a new threshold today. I feel that I am growing as a leader. What I learned today was that no matter how good you plan, things are gonna go wrong,

tempers are going to flare, and you have to be ready to adapt quickly and without hesitation. If you set guidelines for an objective or goal and are flexible, things will work out. I am missing you. I love you. YMETM. I love you so much. With all my heart, Noah

Lucy (e-mail to Ashley)

Hey Gorgeous, Thanks so much for your Pop Pop email and Noah's. It sounds intense, huh? I love to hear from both of you. I consider you **both** to be future leaders of America. Your dedication and sacrifice are building America's infrastructure and security. I am so proud of **both** of you. Not much but work going down around here, me and school and Rick and the book. Alyssa has a date, and David will be spending part of spring break with us. It's a beautiful day and I feel like playing hookie, but I'm afraid I'd miss something. When you and Krysten start decorating, remember, I am good with a mop! YMETM, Nothing Compares to You (NCTU)

Rick

Noah hit a few snags as he integrated his leadership style with those of his peers, which is normal in the military and in large companies of the corporate world. He told Dr. Stallings during an interview for Education Matters, *“Being an officer in the Army is much like running an organization. I have 40 troops under me and several million dollars worth of equipment. I am using my managerial skills and especially the leadership skills. All that I have done throughout the years has made me a more effective leader because I constantly have to stand in front of my men as well as generals and lay out plans and strategies.”* We had many armchair conversations in my room about the “quality” of a man. I told Noah that in my military and corporate experience, I had encountered many people in leadership positions who did more harm than good, but in the military this is a very sensitive issue, especially in a war zone.

Leadership seems to divide itself along the lines of ego; that is, a true leader thinks about the greater good of his people and uses his **reasoning** mind to empower them to achieve unity, harmony, productivity, and proficiency from their combined talents regarding a specific goal. Whereas, the flawed leader seeks power and recognition for himself or his ideology, but he does not share that power. He uses his people in whatever way he perceives will help him to achieve and maintain the “grandiose” or “noble” vision or position his **rational** mind has created. The rational mind of such a leader also has the ability to justify anything he thinks, says, or does in order to gain this self-created vision or goal; in other words, the end justifies the means. Such self-created illusions have no roots in true reality nor do these self-appointed leaders represent true leadership; they represent personal ambition and the desire for power and all the perks it brings.

In truth, armchair conversations about the qualities of the man and of the leader are far different from “boots on the ground leadership” and Noah was struggling to bring his educational leadership skills together with life in a war zone. He knew the principles of leadership in his mind, but now he was in combat situations in which he had to make life and death decisions with high-ranking folks looking on. Noah was finding out quickly that the principles of leadership were one thing and the immediate application of leadership decisions in order to engage the enemy without taking casualties was another thing. Knowing my boy as I do, this was the perfect “non-desk” job he was looking for.

As time went by, his primary concern was not the ogre or two in his chain of command that made life difficult, it was concern that his inexperience would get one of his men hurt. He was the low man on the totem pole being the newest and youngest officer in the unit and he was taking 40 men on patrols and missions daily. I knew he was struggling to get a grip on things because he did not like to make mistakes, especially when a mishap could cost a life. Through the personal challenges Noah faced in sports, drama, or life he pushed himself to high levels of excellence so he would not make mistakes, but in a war zone there is nothing anyone can do to minimize the dangers. This led to another conversation we had on the responsibility of leadership in which I reminded him that he could only be responsible for his own actions and performance. I told him to be professional and impersonal with regard to the mission, but I didn't waste my breath telling him to be professional and impersonal with his men because that was not Noah's way. I did remind him that, regardless of his deep concern for his men, no one can keep a person from meeting his own destiny.

Lucy Harris (e-mail Apr 8, 2005)

Hey Bubba, I am reading *The Gates of Fire* (movie 300) and I woke up this morning thinking you probably have a lot of Polyniekies types in your life—great soldiers, but with so much professional toughness they are not able to know what to do with a pure heart like Alexandros—you might be a bit like Alexandros in that your nose has been broken a bunch, you are the youngest on the block, and you have a special sense of leadership that maybe others don't understand. If we were able to ask Alexandros today if he would have changed his experience with Polyniekies, I feel quite sure that he would say he savored every moment of the pain. I keep realizing it *is* all about leadership and standing strong in the face of chaos, stupidity, or cruelty, and just doing what is right, over and over again WITH AN UNSINKABLE SPIRIT BEATING WITHIN THE RIB CAGE. I thought it was so cool in the end when Polyniekies said that Alexandros was the “best of them all.” You are a beast like Polyniekies, but have the lion heart of Alexandros. Don't let anything shake your faith in you. You might make a mistake or two (like we all do), but you have the integrity and the wisdom to learn and grow. Follow your Zen heart. I know you are grabbing on like the yard dog you are—You Dah Man! I am kissing your picture I have around my neck as I write. God loves you and so do I! And I bet your men do too! Now that's a fine life. YMETM—I love you so much! Mom

P.S. Hailey and Alyssa visited and we baked you and your guys cookies; they are in the mail with food bars, and of course, the ever popular Beanie Babies! It's spring! I love you so much, Mom

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Noah (e-mail 4/10/2005)

Hey Mom, The crayons and toothbrushes came. Tell Lori (At Dr. Talbot's) thank you. Thanks for the solid advice. James 1:12. I am working my butt off, grateful for this experience. I am looking for what it is I am supposed to learn from this. 1) Maybe the military doesn't fit with my leadership style. I am committed to servant leadership. 2) I continue to reevaluate my leadership, and I feel I have been doing well with my guys and the mission. 3) I constantly pray to God for help in developing my confidence, but some days I am forced into the trenches to fight my way back out and see my true ability; muscles develop under stress. 4) I also am learning a great leader is consistent and open to suggestions. My guys respond when I correct them constructively, not chew them out. I can see people know when they do wrong, and often for adults that is painful in its own. Why make it more painful? If I make my soldiers too afraid to

make mistakes, it'll hurt their confidence and then they will spend more time worrying about not screwing up than they do expanding their minds, learning from experience, figuring out new strategies and opportunities and truly becoming great. Thomas Edison found 2000 ways not to make a light bulb. If he worried about not making a mistake, he would never have been the great inventor he was. It's the same with all the revolutionaries of history. It might have been a mistake to fight the British, but if George Washington hadn't come up with the brilliant idea of crossing the Delaware one frigid Christmas eve, we also might never have been free. I am ranting now, but these are things I believe. I do what I can. I love you. YMETM. I miss you. Love you.

Noah never let on that he had questions about whether he fit in with the Army style, that his confidence was shaken. Pay off of the struggles and events of his past life. He knew from experience it was just his emotions reminding him to stay alert for the open window or to pick up the fumble and run. From experience, he had learned to keep on keepin' on. He had read the poster in Mama Gloria's guest bathroom many times. "Put your big girl panties on and deal with it." He knew that if she could do it, he could too and he kept pushing forward with his mighty shoulders but, more important, with his positive will!

Mr. and Mrs. Bobby Allen, Sr.

Our son Bobby served with Noah in Iraq. Bobby said that he didn't know him very well, but that he knew he was "a great guy 'cause he always had a big a** smile on his face. He was always trying to make everyone around him excited to be doing whatever it was we were doing."

And because the support and mail kept pouring in, Noah and his men knew that his mission was important and that he had the support of some wonderful people who he honored and esteemed. We weren't about to let him down, and he knew it; and he wasn't about to give up on his higher vision.

Noah to Christopher Cornwell (UGA Leader Scholars Program)

"My platoon continues to develop and grow in many ways. I can see them maturing and becoming better soldiers and citizens daily. They often mention the support they are receiving from their country and how it is inspiring them. They are turning into true servant leaders."

And if all else failed, he had his sense of humor that had sustained him through so many trials in the past, and, best of all, he had a great woman who had his back!

Ashley (e-mail, Tues, 12 Apr 2005)

I'll be on the look out for some Beanie Babies too! Noah said he bought a card so he should be able to email more now. He sounded good. He was telling me about a mission where he stood on the roof of a building and watched college protesters who were burning an American flag. He said he was blowing them kisses (he at least deserves a little fun though, right?)

Noah (e-mail, 4/16/05)

Over the past three days it has been very violent in Baqubah. There have been a couple of U.S. casualties. These insurgents are changing their strategies using ieds. It is frustrating. We know the enemy is out there. We just do not know where. They won't face us. We will not do anything outside of the Geneva Convention. What we are doing I feel is working, winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, but the insurgents are not afraid to be arrested because they often

times will be let go or they get three hots and a cot...I did receive the boxes and boxes of Beanie Babies and pens and pencils. I look very popular when the mail comes because I receive so many packages. Thank everyone for all you are doing. The children of Iraq thank you. I will take some more pics of the guys handing them out. I am getting low on protein bars. Maybe you could do a drive to "keep Noah swell." Just kidding. Also, could you send me the book I have titled, Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion. I think it is by Robert Cialdini. Should be in my collection of books. Sometimes I think I haven't done anything really that far outside the box. I know going to Iraq and Russia are, but sometimes I feel like most of the things I have done have been very straight-laced. What do you think? Well, I am very happy with my life and all that I am and have become. I guess I get a little nervous about leading a "normal" life. Thank you for listening. I love you. Noah

Lucy to Ashley (e-mail, 4/18/2005)

Hey Gorgeous, I got an email from Noah over the weekend. He sounds great, but thinks that it has been a HOT few days in Ba'Quba and that he has led a normal, straight-laced life; go figure! I just keep praying for his intense awareness and to have the faith to believe in God's plan. I know the universe is perfect, but my awareness of it is not. My prayers are sorta like, "Dear God, please get Noah home in better shape than he went." I pray the same for you. Rick and I talk about you every day and giggle at your light-heartedness. We miss you! We are always here and would love to share the springtime somehow! How is your new place? Noah is almost debt-free! Much love, Lucy and Rick IDWIC!

"I'm Coming Home!"

Jalal Talibani (Iraq's elected president, April 2005)

I shall stand for freedom of thought and expression in a place where it has been trampled and penalized.

Noah (forwarded e-mail from Ashley, Mon, 18 Apr, 2005. Is she trying to tell us something we already know?)

Hey babe, Did you get my last e-mail about Vegas? I have got some news about my leave. It looks like I will be coming home in May rather than July. Probably the first week in May I will leave here. It will take a couple days to get home. Just think in three weeks, tentatively, we'll be together. I hope everything is going well. In my last e-mail I talked about going to Vegas when I finally get home. Get married out there maybe... we could get Elvis to marry us. Anyway I would love to hear from you on this. I love you Ymetm.

Ashley (e-mail 4/22/05)

Hi guys, How are you? I hope everything is going fine. Noah called me this morning and said the date is May 9th that he should be home. He will land at Hartsfield, and be home for 2 weeks. As always, that's tentative, but I'll take it. He sounded really happy and in a good mood! He said that he'll get his CIB (Combat Infantry Badge). I'm sure you, Rick, know what it is, but just in case for Lucy, you have to actually be in a fight, not just over there, to get this badge. What happened was that yesterday he and his men got into a fire fight! The enemy combatants were shooting mortars at him and his men. Noah said he called for artillery and that they helped. He said the artillery rounds were so close that he was getting hit with debris. It sounded scary to me, but he said that it was cool! Anyway, I hope all is well. Just wanted to let you know. I'm counting down the days!! Love you guys, Ashley

Noah (e-mail 4/25)

Hey momma, I cannot wait to see you. I am looking forward to it. My men got a hold of my orders, and where it says, Purpose of Travel, they wrote "Purpose to Finance." "Propose to fiancée" is what they mean; we'll have to work on that spelling thing. What do you think? You do not need to get anything for me. I think being home will be enough. Well, you could stand to get me some beer, maybe some Cherry Wheat. I really can't think of food right now. It is so hot I do not have much of an appetite. It has been getting up to 115 degrees. It feels like I am standing in a sauna. Even the wind is hot. I'll be nice and ripped in no time. Also we lost power on our side of the fob yesterday, so we have no ac. I am sleeping on the floor which is concrete to stay cool at night. Please tell everyone you see how much it means to us soldiers and the Iraqi people, what they are doing. I will gladly stop in Ellijay over my break. Maybe we could schedule it where I could try to see everyone at once. I love you. YMETM. IDWIC. By the way, you will not need to take a number. You better be at the airport when I get off the plane! I am planning on operating out of the mountains while I am home. I know I will be all over the place, but I want to spend a lot of time with you guys. You two might have to hang up your "I am too old" excuses and come celebrate with me. Anyway I love you.

Noah (Hey Dad, April 25)

*I have followed your advice. Showing a thick face while operating with a black heart, (a term for functioning impersonally with emotional detachment), that way I do not react to anyone's manic attitude. In a war zone there are plenty. I am polite and address everyone respectfully, but beyond that I do not speak to the guys with issues unless they speak to me. We have been performing well as a platoon. I think everyone has noticed that and we are getting some great missions. I will continue to do my part in keeping my platoon squared away. My platoon has told me they have a lot of confidence in me, so that keeps me inspired. I am here for them and they know I will be consistent. I am reading this book called **Good to Great**. It is on businesses that have outperformed all the rest. It is a great book. One of the factors is the leadership, called level 5 leadership. A lot of good leaders want everyone to depend on them and be solely responsible for a unit's successes. EGO. But great leaders, set the unit up to function no matter who is in charge. So, if they leave, the unit will continue functioning on a high level. Leadership taking less credit and more responsibility is my philosophy. When it is all said and done my men will say, "We did it ourselves." Cpt. Toon for the most part lets us operate without micro-managing, and you know I am okay with that. We have been very busy lately. Please tell everyone we are thinking of them. I love you YMETM. AMF, Noah*

Ashley (e-mail 4/26)

I am so excited about Noah coming home for R and R! I have already told my boss that when Noah comes home (the days seem to always be tentative) I am taking 2 weeks off. He said that was fine, just to let him know! I was thinking that Noah and I would just stay with y'all for the two weeks. That way we could all hang out and everyone will get precious "Noah time." Basically, I want Noah to do whatever/go wherever he wants. I'm just along for the ride. I had mentioned having a welcome home party and he got really excited. Kristyn and I will have it at our place or anywhere will work. I'm gonna ask Noah if he has a preference. We can have it either the day he gets home or like that Fri (what do you think?) I've already started telling his friends and they're all excited too. Start telling everyone that you and Rick want to come also. I'm gonna get some invitations tomorrow. I can't wait!!! Talk to you later, YMETM, 13 hugs, Ashley

We were all thrilled about his R&R visit, especially after we began to understand that he was coming home, but the mission was coming with him, and we were all invited to participate.

Noah (e-mail 4/27)

Am I going to be able to get together with James Padgett and Courtney? Anybody who is a friend of my guys, I want to see so I can personally thank them. Anyway, leave some money in my account to play with in May. We need to think of a present for Ashley. I am going to the Haji shop and buying a stack of Dinars with Saddam's face on them. I'll get some pebbles for your students too. Tell Dad I'll get those beanie pics for him tomorrow. My internet is pretty slow, but I will try to send one over the net. I'll snag as many souvenirs as I can. I love you. We are going to have a blast. I e-mailed Cheryl and Chris Cornwell because I want to meet with the Leonard Leaders. Also, I am going to get together with Earl and Gene. If there is anything else, let me know. Thank you for e-mailing everybody for me. When I am President of my company and the U.S., I am hiring you as my pr person and press secretary. You're the bomb. I love you. YMETM! IDWIC! Your ever grateful son, Noah

Mom (e-mail to Noah, 4/29/05)

Hey Night Train, I took the press secretary thing seriously, and we have you set up on ETC-3TV for an interview with Christy Lindstrum and Dr. Stallings any day you say. They are so excited—they want you to share about your experiences, but I also thought it would be a good way for you to just look into the camera, smile your best, award-winning smile, and say all your thank you wishes at once. How does that sound to you? I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOU!!!!!! Scary seeing your boots in the middle of smoking, scorched earth (photograph), but I am so proud. What's this I hear about a moustache? 3 Hairs? You just let your muscles speak for you! WAMH! IDWIC! Momma, YMETM

Noah (e-mail to Lucy, 4/29, Hey Mom!)

You are already proving yourself as my press sec. If you are trying to impress me, remember you already have the job. I would be happy to do an interview. Let's look at the dates when I get home. I will get home when the army gets me there. So I cannot commit to any certain day. I would like to try and knock out all appearances in Ellijay in one day during the week. Did you send that picture to Sonny Perdue? I couldn't find his address. Help! I wrote to Nathan Deal, Saxby Chambliss, and Johnny Isakson. I wrote them about how great their performance and perseverance is with regard to Iraq. We are making the world and the U.S. a better place. I asked Nathan Deal if I could meet with him. I told the senators I hoped to meet with them upon the safe return of the 3 ID. I figure I need to save some time for Ash and you guys. One other person I would like to meet with is Joe McCutchen. Maybe he can come by the TV station the day I do the interview with Christy. I got some great pics of the platoon and some cool stuff to give out. I also told Peggy Puckett and the Joy Circle Prayer Warriors that I would be home. If we could schedule them in that would be great as they have been a constant support. Don't forget The Vine. During the month of May, we will just pay the minimums on my bills. I am growing a moustache. All the PLs and PSGs are. We are having a competition to see who can grow the best one. I plan on shaving it before I get home. I love you so much. I have got a big stack of dinars to give out to people. I am going to see what else I can snag. Thank you for all you are doing. YMETM. IDWIC. Your ever loving son!

P.S. I want to put together a nice letter to send to President Bush when I get home. He's a rock.

Noah (e-mail to Ashley, 5/6/05 Hey Babe!)

*I am at this place called LSA A*****. People here should not be allowed to call their time here a deployment. They have 2 swimming pools, a movie theatre, mini golf, and Burger King. This place is ridiculous. Anyway I should be flying home tomorrow evening which would put me in the states on Sunday morning. I would love to go to that work lunch with you. I would like to see you*

in action. Anyway, I'll call you when I find out better details. I'll probably call you from Germany. I love you and cannot wait to see you. YMETM. Your baby, Noah

Mother's Day

As we were cleaning up on Saturday night after chaperoning the Gilmer High School prom, my buddies cheered when I said, "Happiness is having your son come home from Iraq for Mother's Day!" Rick and I headed out an hour early in case there was traffic—always possible around Atlanta. We were so excited because we thought we were going to be the first ones there until we saw Gloria and Ashley jump up and run toward us. Knowing that the Army might change up the arrival time to avoid attention, she and her mom had arrived two hours early. She said, "I was not going to take a chance that Noah would get here and have no one waiting for him." She looked so beautiful; I have always loved to look into her sparkling eyes not just because of the attractive, mischievous, good humor lurking there, but because her eyes are almost the exact same warm, forest-green color as Noah's. In the gentle, golden glow of the clear morning light filtering down from the skylights high overhead, she was a picture of love, pride, and relief.

We had posters and flags ready to welcome our hero home, and we were not alone; there was a crowd of folks gathering, and when we started to block the passageway, the compassionate women of the U.S.O. directed us to stand behind a velvet cordon so as to allow for the free flow of airport foot traffic and not violate all the safety codes. It worked out really well because as each soldier arrived at the top of one of the famous "mile high" Hartsfield escalators, he or she had lots of people clapping and cheering. We gave each one a hero's welcome and the travelers who happened to be passing through joined in as well. By the time Lt. Harris's smiling face popped up between the guide rails, we had built up a full head of steam, and we let him have it. Talk about hugs and kisses! I knew the minute I saw him, that he was better than okay. My "salt of the earth" "bottom feeder" was reaching out to touch everyone. His eyes lit up when he saw someone he recognized, and when he met someone he didn't, he turned and went to work, lighting those little fires of inspiration.

Dad

Noah's being home from Iraq seemed a little unreal to me at first. I couldn't help thinking of my year in Vietnam where we had no computers, no e-mail, no cell phones, and no contact with home except an occasional letter. We had sent him off to war five months ago and now here he was standing in front of me. I was thrilled and anxious at the same time because I knew he would be returning soon. In the meantime, we were all fired up and determined to make this the most enjoyable two weeks of our lives. As we left the airport for Ashley's house, Noah and I decided to ride together with Dubya, our new golden retriever puppy. Dubya sat between us while Noah and I talked about the war; we had quite a conversation. Having been in a military zone myself, we spoke of his experience over there without mincing words which we could not have done with the ladies present. He really did enjoy what he was doing, but he told me how intense it was riding around at high speeds in the Humvees, how dangerous it was with IEDs and roadside bombs. Noah said the insurgents (Ali-Baba is the name the Iraqi kids gave them) were learning how to "shape charge" their explosives (buried IEDs) so that they would penetrate the armored vehicles. About the roadside bombs, he said that every time they went by something unusual, like a dog carcass, a pile of trash, or an abandoned car, his whole body would tense up as they drove by. All the guys experience what he called the "pucker factor." He said trash was everywhere, so it was pretty tense. He talked about how bad it smelled as well as how bad it has been for the Iraqi people. He said it was unpleasant in that regard, but he was very motivated

about what he was doing. Little did I realize what a prophetic conversation we were having about IEDs.

When we got to Ashley's house, the whole family was there like Christmas or Thanksgiving. We all ate and talked and just hung out trying to absorb as much of Noah as was humanly possible, listening to his stories, dwelling on his smile and light, and marveling at all the bug bites on his arms. Then he was ready to head to the mountains. He and Ashley came home with us and decided to reside in the guest cabin while he was here, for which we were very glad. Ashley's boss had given her two weeks off so they were virtually inseparable. The little cabin across the creek became their base of operations. We had some time together, but Noah and Ashley were on the move, talking to people, on the phone and in person. They went on a two-week whirlwind tour to celebrate freedom and to thank everyone who supported them in their mission of spreading democracy to the Iraqi people by helping them to vote and by restoring a vision of peace and hope to their country. I only got to see him sporadically because he had made plans to visit organizations and church groups that had been sending, food, supplies, Beanie Babies, and prayers. There were lots of people and he wanted to make contact with as many of them as possible to tell them what a difference they were making. Everywhere he went he proudly represented the military, the mission, and his men doing exactly what a top-notch officer should be doing. He even contacted the governor and many of his federal and state senators and congressmen. He told Johnny Isakson about the beauty of the children. He urged Congressman Nathan Deal and Senator Saxby Chambliss to stay resolved and not play into the hands of the terrorists and America's detractors. He urged everyone to remember that, although he was sacrificing his personal and career goals, he was doing so voluntarily because he was clear about his resolve to stand up for America and the principles which have made her a bastion of hope for a world that is struggling to be free.

One thing I know for sure, he ate well everywhere he went because folks just wanted to feed him or do something to honor him. This was so typical of Noah; rather than thinking of himself, he was over here spending his precious vacation time doing PR for the Army, educating people about the war, and representing his men. He made me very proud. And Ashley was with him every step of the way demonstrating her strength, support, and determination. What a couple they were!

We often spent the evenings together and one of the first things we did was watch Adony Batista's DVD of the Wolfpack. SSG Batista, better known as the *Latin From Manhattan Production Company*, did a great job of capturing the Wolf Pack's daily life. It was full of fun with Andrew Miller giving a guided tour of the men's barracks, "The Wooden Palace," which looked like piano crates stacked on top of each other; and there was William Long playing a psychologist explaining why the guys loved Jimmy's Barber Shop. SSG Jimmy Brown actually cut everybody's hair. There was even footage of 2LT Harris and Ski's ill-fated attempt to cross, in their Humvee, a big mud puddle which happened to be about six feet deep. Yes, they needed a tow truck! And we saw Noah at the Blue Dome with Travis Miller, blowing kisses at the idiot insurgents who were exercising their new right to freedom of speech by protesting the presence of the force which had just liberated them from a tyrannical dictator. Go figure! Shakespeare might have called it cathartic. When it got to the memorial service in Iraq to 1SG David Salie, although Noah tried to be brave, his tears came and so did mine. Mom and Ashley both hugged

their boy and comforted him the best they could for such an inconsolable loss.

For Lucy, it was the best Mother's Day ever, "Two weeks with the ultimate American Patriot," she said. For me it was such a great time because I wanted to see how Noah had weathered combat and how he was doing within. I had guided and trained him throughout life to have a strong and pure spirit, and I wanted to see if the light was still shining in his heart. I was concerned that my "knight of the spirit" was in some way damaged by the harshness of war or had become bitter from the suffering he had witnessed. I was very grateful to see that his heart and spirit had grown beyond anything I could ever imagine. His cup was not half full; it was running over!

Noah (ETC-3 interview with Dr. Mark Stallings, May, 2005)

(Chuckles)After college, the regular military is a shock. It's not like college where you go in flip flops and throw on a hat. I learned to drink coffee (more chuckles), but I like the discipline. Everyone is trained so well that they act with instinct. Training starts and you see a bunch of kids; and then you train, and the culmination is a group of men who operate as a team... There are some trees in Ba'Quba, and they irrigate the palm groves. So you go from a hot, arid city to the lush groves. We're always looking for insurgents and if it's slow we get down and interact with the people. I have an interpreter who helps me talk to the sheiks and muktars to see what they are thinking. It's difficult for the guys because you fight one day and you hug the populace the next. And you never know who you are talking with. Like I could be talking and smiling with a terrorist, asking, "Is everything going OK for you?" You never know, I might face him in battle that night. Still, it is working. We are empowering the people, giving them jobs and a future.

Noah (Jesse's story)

Noah said of his experiences in Iraq, "*Leadership is the same everywhere. You see someone frowning and you put up your hand and wave; and then, in Iraq, you take your interpreter over to them and you talk to them and let them talk to you through the interpreter. And if you listen well, pretty soon, they're gonna be smiling at ya.*" That's how Noah learned how to say "Inshallah (the will of God)." He said every time he said it, the Iraqis would just burst out laughing at his pronunciation as well as his timing, and Noah loved to laugh, so he repeated it frequently. When he came home, he taught it to us when he referred to the human element that he had met through the story of Jesse. Jesse taught Noah the meaning of "Inshallah" as well as the translation of the window stickers that the Iraqi patriots are pasting everywhere and Noah handed out when he got home. They say, "I love Iraq," and Noah did too, because of Jesse. Jesse taught Noah about the magnitude of the Iraqi suffering. The LT said, "*I don't know his Iraqi name, but he's a friend and a brother in arms,*" as he described in detail how Jesse showed up to go on patrol every day with a sharpened stick because that was the best weapon he could find. Noah knew that Jesse had broken many family ties so he could fight alongside the Wolf Pack; Noah deeply respected Jesse's determination to fight for the freedom of his country even if it meant he lost his family. He didn't want to die, but he was willing to risk his blood to refresh "the roots of the tree of liberty" in Iraq. On one particular patrol, Noah gave Jesse the night stick we had given him for Christmas; it was really cool because it was retractable; if you flicked your wrist just right, it would extend about three feet. Noah said, "*After the mission, Jesse thanked me and went to give it back. I said, 'No, it's yours. Inshallah.'* And he clutched it to his chest and probably slept with it. It was his most prized possession."

Lucy—One Day in Ellijay

I heard a hubbub at the front door of the school and saw students walking backwards in advance of an entourage ambling down the hall. Watching from the cafeteria which was filled with folks who had been writing to his Wolf Pack and others who simply wanted to meet him, I deduced correctly that Noah and Ashley had “entered the building.” We all hushed and strained to catch our first glimpse. When he strode into view toward the waiting crowd, shaking hands, patting shoulders, laughing and smiling, I was amazed at his poise, but concerned because I saw Ashley was being separated from him. It was kind of like a Hollywood “hero’s welcome” mob scene. Elise Gates (Wrestling/Marine Niel's little sister) saw what was happening and took over as Ashley’s bodyguard, making sure that Ashley didn’t get pushed aside in the shuffle. To Elise and most of the kids, Ashley was just as big a hero as the LT of the Wolf Pack. Noah was beaming, talking, and waving. I noticed that one of my students who had never met Noah had tears streaming down her face. Noah blushed with pride and smiled encouragement when a quartet from chorus sang a song they had prepared for him. Then, he thanked the kids: *“What you are doing here is just as important as what we are doing. Keep up the good work; we couldn’t do it without you.”* Then we started taking pictures, and he was spreading the 13 Hugs! When the bell rang, we reluctantly headed back to class, but Noah and Ashley’s day was just beginning. From there they went to Mrs. Miller’s theater class and Noah shared his experiences in the auditorium where he had so often brought down the house with his performances. Then he walked Ashley all over the school grounds as he tried to touch base with everyone: coaches, teachers, his buddies in the office. Oh how he loved his people.

Linda Rogers (GHS secretary)

It was so sweet. He came to visit me and we talked for a long time, and Noah asked me to always take care of his Momma.

From there, he went to one of several interviews, the first with Christy Lindstrum at the Ellijay ETC-3 studio. He spent time thanking his community for all they were doing to support his men and stressed that America’s mission was working. He told Christy, *“The big picture is getting missed. It’s not about us trying to kill bad guys; it’s about spreading freedom to the world. America has been blessed with freedom and as such I feel it is our responsibility to give it to the world.”* Joe McCutcheon made it to the interview and took him out to lunch afterwards. Later, Noah popped into my class room and talked to my students about his experiences. When I went out into the hall to hug him and Ashley goodbye, he said, *“Mom, Joe McCutcheon said he’d vote for me for president. He told me to get back from Iraq and make a lot of money so that I could stay independent and not be swayed by the guys with big pockets. I think that was good advice. I guess I’ve got some thinking to do. We’ll see.”* Ashley kidded him that first she would have to convert him into a Libertarian, which is her party affiliation. I just shook my head and watched as the two of them headed down the hall. He just had to hug secretary, Patricia Holden and Becky Oliver, the vocational director in honor of Ruth Caudell who always gave him candy when he was in high school.

When I got home from school, Noah was putting on his desert uniform for an evening of church meetings; he wanted his prayer buddies to get the full picture of whom they were supporting. The first stop was to the First United Methodist Church, home of the Joy Circle prayer warriors. On the way there, I told him about the day I had met one of the Wolf Pack’s biggest supporters,

Peggy Puckett, at the post office. I had been carrying as many boxes as I could to the counter, hoping no one was in front of me. The undisputed happiest U. S. postal worker in the country, Sheila was always upbeat when I showed up and she did her best to process my stuff fast because she knew where it was going and that I had to get back to school before my next class started. That day, I had been surprised to see there was someone in front of me with the same kind of boxes, the ones that the post office graciously provides for people like us. She turned around and took one look at me, and said, "Now I just bet you are Lucy Harris." It was Peggy Puckett. It's amazing how the hands of love move us into circles of light. That one moment in my memory will always be worth a thousand prayers.

Peggy Puckett (The Joy Circle, First United Methodist Church of Ellijay)

One Sunday at the First United Methodist Church of Ellijay, Georgia, I heard an announcement that there were pictures and requests from soldiers in Iraq who wanted letters and packages. We could pick up some after church. When I went back to get a few, there were 23 left. I could not allow those 23 young men to be disappointed; so I took all of them. Upon thinking about it, I realized I could not handle them alone. I took them to the next Joy Circle meeting. The Joy Circle is one of the United Methodist Women's Circles. I asked for help. They readily agreed. Each woman took two or three of the men to whom they would send cards and letters. The group also decided to send packages to these 23 men. We were given a dog tag by GHS students with the platoon's name on it, and we placed the name of each of the men on one. These were given to the women who had chosen the man, and they hung them in a very visible place to remind them to pray for their safety. We began to feel as if we had sons in the service in Iraq. Upon the request of Noah Harris, we began to send Beanie Babies to the men so that they could share them with the children. This continued for approximately one year until these men came home.

During May, Noah Harris and his mother, Lucy, visited with the United Methodist Women. He talked with us about his experiences, his appreciation for what the women had done for him and his men. He said he carried grenades in one pocket and Beanie Babies in another pocket. He was very proud of his mission to serve his country and the people of Iraq. He was very proud of his men and was devoted to them, and they were devoted to him.

This is a scripture that Noah sent to us. Psalm 56:11: In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?

After a sumptuous meal served by the men of the church, Noah rose to speak, and, though I had heard it before, it was the first time I connected with his symbolic reference to America's mission of strength and compassion. I was so proud when he said he had "*Bullets for the bad guys in one pocket, and Beanie Babies for the children of Iraq in the other.*" Ashley and I watched as he worked the room; we both felt like we were part of something so much bigger than our imaginations could handle. It was really something. Finally he brought it to a close, explaining he had more stops to make that night. Tears glistened throughout the crowded hall and well wishes murmured, following us as we left; and when we got outside, Noah turned to me as he so often had, and said, "*OK, Mom, where are the directions to The Vine?*" Of course, I had left them on my desk at school, but I was pretty sure I knew where we were going, so we headed out. However, after about twenty minutes of land navigation adventure in the mountains, we had to go back to the school to get the directions. Up in the mountains, if you miss one turn, who knows where you'll end up? Undaunted and totally determined, with directions in hand, hoping

the police would not arrest a man in uniform, Noah practiced his speed driving. We got there late, but not too late as the church was lit up with candles and everyone was so happy to see Noah.

Janice Burgess (Pastor, Fruit of the Vine)

The night Noah came to The Vine to encourage us to keep praying, we felt he had come home to **us**. Even though he had never been in the building, his name was as familiar in that place as the names of those who gathered there twice weekly. His actions were talked about among the group each week as though he had always been a part of us. We quoted him to our children. IDWIC—"I do what I can." We held him up as the example of how to succeed regardless of one's age. Week after week, for almost a year, we had lit the candles, read aloud the names of the men and women who fought a war in a place none of us could even imagine, and knelt together to agree in prayer that they would return home whole—both mentally and physically. After a while, the names were no longer just names. The young men and women became "family" to a group of prayer warriors who grew to love them as if they had grown up next door or just a short piece down the road.

Noah was home for a visit and he eagerly came to say "thank you" for praying. He came to tell us "*never give up or surrender.*" He encouraged us to believe that this was a noble cause regardless of mixed reviews in the media. Kathi Hill remembers how his face lit up when he spoke about the children he had come to love. He gave us a feeling of hope for our country. But, most of all, he came to tell us how precious "home" was. When he talked of this place where he grew up, he became emotional. He became excited. He became reflective. He talked about a place to "belong" where folks stick together and know each other by name. He talked about community and the value of mountains and streams and blue skies, and he reminded us of the price that must be paid in order to keep what we have.

Margie Evans wrote, "I remember that one of the group told Noah that when he came home he could bring his men to Ellijay and we would feed them. He said, '*You'll make them all fat.*' And someone responded, 'No, you can march them all back to town.' He laughed and his smile was beautiful. I remember his conviction and his passion. It felt so good to hear a young man talk about the 'good cause' that he was fighting for and that he believed in it."

We had invited Noah to come visit us so that we might encourage him and lift his Spirit during his short visit home. We wanted him in our presence so that we might say "thank you for protecting our freedom, for giving of yourself, for being the man you are." That was our intention. But Noah encouraged us. Noah lifted our Spirit, and Noah thanked us for what we were doing for him. Anna Kate Hill felt that Noah had a glow about him.

With the backdrop of candlelight, one of the group sang for Noah, "Wall of Prayer."

Oh, my brother, when I'm weak
Would you stand in stead for me?
And pray a fortress 'round me strong that can't be moved?
And I promise you today, when I bow my knees to pray,
I'll do my best to build a wall of prayer for you.
Sometimes a wall of grace,

Sometimes a wall of faith,
Other times it's sweet mercy that I need.
But, the one for which I long
It makes all the others strong.
I need a wall of prayer surrounding me.

Crystal Hall remembered that before she sang, Noah spoke of our prayers being a "shield" around him and the men under his command. She said that as she listened to him, she was overwhelmed knowing that when he was finished speaking, she would be singing "Wall of Prayer." She said, "I thought how this night was so special and that the Lord had put it all together in such a wonderful way."

Noah left us that night with a renewed strength to pray on for those young men and women who faced the trials of war on foreign soil. Lynn Wood recalls thinking how passionate he seemed to be about what he was doing and how humble he seemed in his spirit; the one thing that really stood out was his compassion.

The next week when we met to pray, Noah was leaving that very night to return to Iraq. The group recalls now that as we knelt to pray, many were overcome with emotion. As the candles were lit, tears began to stream from our eyes, and we found ourselves without words. One member of the group simply laid her hands on the list of names that lay before them on the floor and through her tears she cried, "Safe home, O Lord! Bring them safe home!"

Every day of his R&R was like that, so he and Ash didn't go to Vegas and they didn't even get the "big ring" because they decided that when he came home for good, they were going to do it right and throw a big party for everyone, the whole nine yards with a formal engagement party, a big church wedding, and a real honeymoon. They weren't in a rush because they knew that everything between them was just right, and they were united in the efforts to promote the positive.

Noah (Times Courier, letter to the editor, written during R&R)

On behalf of myself, and my men, I want to extend a warm thank you to the many students, churches, and individuals who are participating in the Adopt-A-Troop project.

Believe me when I say that it warms my heart to walk into the Army post office and have everyone know me by name because my men are receiving so much mail from you. Your consistent communication reminds each of us soldiers that we are fighting for a country that we love and that loves and supports us.

We are so grateful to all of you, and though we may not be able to write back as often as we wish, please know that each and every word that you write, package that you send, or prayer that you lift up for us means everything to us.

You are doing your part to support this amazing nation, and to bring democracy to the world. We couldn't be here without you.

On a personal note, I find it almost impossible to express the gratitude and honor I feel to be a part of the community of Ellijay. Through all the years of my childhood, I have been surrounded by the loving support of a community that cares. I know any success I achieve is due in large part to this wonderful place.

Please know I am proud to be serving my country for you, and I know that you are with me and my men each day. We can see it and feel it, so keep the care-mail coming.

It's going to be a long haul, but with your help, we will get the job done and come home. My men and I will do our best to stay in touch. But, even when you don't hear from us, remember the Third Platoon, Wolfpack, is thinking of you every day.

Though Noah wished to spend more time with his community, working off his tightly packed schedule, he and Ashley took off for Athens, eager to give back to the University of Georgia folks who had given the Wolf Pack so much support. Noah met with the leader scholars to express his gratitude and to spread his message.

David Markiewicz and Mike Morris (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, June 21, 2005)

...Chris Cornwell, director of the Leonard Leadership Scholars program at the UGA Terry College of Business, from which Harris received his bachelor's degree, said he got to know Noah through a popular pen pal program he started after Harris left for Iraq... Harris thought it would be good for troop morale to receive letters from his peers, Cornwell said. He started a program through which 60 students in the leadership institute would swap e-mails with the 40 people in his platoon. Cornwell e-mail (From Noah): *"Today was a great day for Iraq. They had their first election establishing political parties. This is a first big step to their liberation and freedom. Not too far in the future they will be establishing their constitution. I am thrilled to be a part of this."*

Otis Brumby (UGA Leader Scholar buddy)

I asked him about Iraq. He said he didn't have any regrets about volunteering to go over there. The only thing he thought was disheartening was the way the media was only focusing on the negative things that were happening. He talked about how they were building schools and getting infrastructure stable over there. He was really passionate about everything he did. The best thing to say about Noah is just that he was a natural leader and just extremely focused and driven. Anything he put his mind to, he just got behind 110 percent.

They spent what Ashley has hilariously referred to as a "memorable" night with his ROTC buddies and headed straight to Atlanta. The details of his travels are a little bit sketchy for us because he was constantly on the move. One time when he called to check in, we asked, "Now, where are you?"

"I'm on the way to the governor's office. We're running a little late. I hope we make it." Both he and Ashley wanted to personally express their feelings about his mission to Governor Perdue because Noah felt it was his job to do his best to help the mission succeed. If the press was going to be negative, he was going to do his best to counterbalance with positive, first-hand news from the front. Noah said, *"The governor seemed a little puzzled about why I was there until I told him about all the Iraqis I knew on a first name basis, about how they were fighting for the basic liberty that we take for granted, and how much we needed his support. Maybe he wasn't used to*

hearing from a second lieutenant, but that's OK. I'm glad I went. I'll go see him again when we get back." That afternoon, he met up with Earl Leonard and Gene Anderson for a special luncheon. They loved that he had gone to see the governor almost as much as they loved to feed their boy. He ate it up, the food and fellowship, with gusto and showed his mentors how their lessons of faith, hope, and leadership were paying off.

Frank Farrell (Highwoods Properties)

My respect for your son only grew as I read his e-mails describing life in Iraq. Despite his 24/7 schedule, Noah took the time to write to us as a group and individually. In May, I was fortunate to be included at a lunch for Noah hosted by Gene Anderson. During the course of the meal it was clear to all that we were in the presence of, dare I say, a great man. Most people lead quiet, decent lives. They leave the world in the condition in which they found it. Noah Harris does not fall into this group. He was extraordinary. With all my heart I believe that Iraq and the world will be a better place and my family will be safer because of Lt. Noah Harris

The next evening, we all met at a popular restaurant in Atlanta, where James Padgett and Courtney Stewart had arranged for a wonderful dinner in Noah's honor.

James Lee Padgett

I met Noah's mom Lucy outside of the Kroger Grocery Store in Dawsonville, Georgia, on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. Lucy was out front with her students raising money for postage to send care packages to her son and his platoon in Iraq. I walked by and turned around and went back to introduce myself and ask how I could help. Their enthusiasm was contagious so.... most of my team at my office began working and corresponding with Lucy, Rick, and Noah and his platoon. We helped with postage, sent e-mails and mailed care packages. Our office team loved "shopping for the guys," boxing up the stuff and stuffing notes in the boxes.

A while later, I heard that Noah would be coming home for a short R&R and Lucy called and asked if I'd like to meet Noah while he was home. A few weeks later, Jan (my wife), Lucy, Rick, Courtney (our main contact for our office with Noah and his platoon), Noah, and his fiancée Ashley met at *Bones* in Atlanta for a memorable evening. From the time we sat down at the table, I was in awe of the strength of this family, the positive aura, and I could tell Rick and Lucy were as proud as they could be of their son Noah.

After a while, Noah talked humbly of tales of his platoon's mission in Iraq, how he was conflicted carrying Beanie Babies (for the kids) in one pocket and M-16 clips in the other and how the United States was making a difference for the people of Iraq. For me, what a refreshing account after listening to the negativity of the "unbiased" news media in this country for four years. Anyway, within an hour, Jan and I felt as if we had known this family all of our lives. I was convinced we were in the presence of a true American hero. Selfish thoughts of "Wow! I would like for this astonishing young man to come to work for my team when he finishes his tour of duty" gave way to true admiration for this heroic young man and his belief in the cause he was willing to put his life on the line for.

The evening ended and as we were outside waiting to depart, we asked someone to take our picture, said our goodbyes and each went our separate way. That picture remains in my office. When I got into the car with Jan, The first thing I said after starting out was "that guy could be president of this country."

My father fought in World War II and I was 17 when the Vietnam War ended. My dad never talked much about his time in North Africa or Italy. Until I met Noah, Rick and Lucy, I truly did not understand the sacrifices my dad made and the character and courage it takes to put it all on the line as with Noah.

Noah had one more thing on the top of his priority list. From the moment he stepped back onto American soil, he never forgot he was going to make a special trip to Fort Benning to visit Brigitte Toon and her family. He also felt compelled to deliver some 13 Hug Treatments to some very special people.

Deedy Salie (Wife of 2nd Platoon Leader, Sgt. David Salie)

Any man that will drive three hours one way while he was on R&R to come see Chyna, Luke, Hunter and me before we left.....just to make sure we were okay...is a truly remarkable soul that I will hold in my heart forever.

Of course, Noah and Ashley had their own time together. If they couldn't make it to Nevada, Noah wanted to take his beautiful, "wicked smart" "mall chick" out for a night or two in restaurants they had yet to try; and, of course, they had to make a pit stop at *The Red Door*. Noah's "Mother's Day, Philanthropic, Patriotic R&R" flew by in a whirl of joyous celebration, but the last weekend found them secluded back at the cabin on the creek. We strolled around outside, inhaling the fresh air of Noah's "Mecca." We kept looking for that one, lone magnolia blossom to burst open. Mother Nature was saving the fragrance for something special, and we tried to will it open because we knew Noah wouldn't be home for a long time. I remember telling him that whenever he felt a sudden cool breeze when he was back in Ba'Quba, it would be our prayers surrounding him like the scent of a magnolia.

Rick's Last Day

Every time we were together by ourselves, Noah and I had some deep and meaningful conversations. We both spoke and felt as if each conversation we had could be our last discussion on the matter. Throughout his life we truly had the most ideal father-son, teacher-student, and best friend kind of relationship. I was now realizing that my boy had become a man and, in my estimation, Noah was truly a man among men, not only as a warrior but as a friend and as a servant of Christ. On the last day Noah was here, Lucy and Ashley drove into Ellijay to get a new chain for his Celtic cross, and he and I went up to our top piece of land on the 4-wheeler. It was a glorious May morning, so beautiful and so blue. The sun was twinkling down through the trees like little crystals in the leaves, beaming rays of light to the ground all around us. We slowly ambled through the pines and hardwoods along the path to the peak enjoying the crisp morning air. The beauty of the cobalt blue sky felt as if it had been prepared especially for us. Just being together and breathing was sheer goodness to us; at that moment, we wanted for nothing. When we reached the mountain top, we stood reverent and silent, admiring the 360-degree view. We'd always thought of this land as being Noah's, and he and Ashley had talked about building a little cabin on the spot where we walked. And then it happened—the unspoken between us was now being spoken. He turned to me and said, "*Dad, I want you to know if anything happens to me, I really want you to know that I have had the most wonderful life. You and Mom have been great, and my life has been so wonderful. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. I wouldn't change a thing.*" I didn't say much. I just wanted to enjoy our moments together and banish my dreams from the moment.

Mom's Last Day

It was such a special day. North Georgia was hot and a little humid, but Noah assured us that, in comparison to where he was going, it was perfect weather. We dawdled our way to the airport, getting there extra early because the military makes it a policy to withhold the exact time of departure; and we wanted to take our time going through security and share a leisurely lunch together. The lines were long, the airport packed with travelers and many men and women in desert camo; but we were in no hurry. We wanted to linger, chatting, exchanging ideas, and making plans for the future, talking about what we were going to do when Noah got home for good, maybe in six or seven months. After lunch, he and Ashley strolled off for a while, and Rick and I secured a table for a final afternoon cup of coffee and a quiet goodbye. Just as Noah and Ashley sauntered to our table, something heavy hit Noah from behind causing him to buckle and shudder-step to keep his balance. Wonder of wonders! It was his niece Hailey. She had catapulted and landed firmly on his back and was hanging on for dear life. I remembered how mad she had been the previous week when he had held her upside down and dipped her hair into the creek. Noah just swung her around and tossed her over his head. It was a wonderful few moments.

We were talking and laughing when Captain Jeff Green, a buddy from Ba'Quba who I always knew was going to be one of Noah's friends for life, joined the party and it got even livelier, both men bright and charming, trading stories about the Blue Dome from which Noah had blown so many kisses. As we sat there holding hands, patting arms, smiling encouragement and love to each other, the concourse steadily had filled up with America's best and brightest, all heading back to the "Big Sandbox." It was like the calm before the storm; everyone was completely at ease in that sunlit, open passageway, happy to absorb the peace. Then, from somewhere, a signal must have been given, and the hundreds of patriots started forming up, slowly at first. Captain Green peeled away and headed toward the phone to make one last call. Bill (Noah's brother-in-law, Hailey's dad) and Hailey hugged Uncle Noah and headed on home with promises to get up to the mountains soon.

Then it was our turn to say goodbye. Just as when he had done something special as a baby, I struggled to sharpen my senses and impress the moment in my consciousness so that I could recall it whenever I needed a Noah moment. It was going to be at least six months until I felt again the immensely releasing experience of squeezing with all my might as he squeezed back, lifting me off my feet, emitting those warm, moist, Noah smells; and he said as he always did, "*I love you, Mama. I love you, Pop. Take care of Ashley. I love you, Ash. YMETM.*" He hugged us all separately again because, as Ashley always says, "Noah had to have the last hug!" and after squeezing Ashley tightly one more time, he demanded a four-way hug and kiss, and without releasing us, told us, "*Be brave. My men need me. I gotta get back to them.*" Then, he turned purposefully and walked away to catch up with Captain Green. It was a comfort to us to know that he would be with a buddy on the long flight into the darkness. We stood transfixed and watched him as he trotted down the wide, gently sloping Hartsfield concourse, filled with heroes in desert camo. When he arrived at the gate, he paused as though he might look back at us as he always had, but this time was different; his mission was calling. There was no final wave, no Honk, Honk, Honk, Honk-Honk! He turned to the left and stood still. Illuminated for a moment in a patch of streaming golden sun rays, he looked straight ahead as though he were smiling at someone, maybe at Captain Jeff. We held our breath and each others' hands as he stepped into

the light carrying our love and the compassion of the American people to the world.

Noah (Iraq Mantra)

I am a warrior and I will live as such. I answer to my higher power and a higher purpose. I cower before no one. I am courageous. I hold honor and character above all. I am thick faced and black hearted (the impersonal philosophy reference). I am virtuous, yet I let nothing stand in the way of victory. I am willing to face defeat and fear. My spirit and heart are fearless. I am protected by God and the universe. I hold myself to the highest standards. I am the best in each thing I do in each moment. I do what I can.

Noah (untitled)

Atop the hill in an ocean of tall straw,
The solemn oak stands alone
Beneath the same sky as many forests,
Basking in the same sun as it begins to set,
Yet this tree is solitary in its place.
This tree knows only of itself and loneliness,
But this tree stands strong.
Winds shall not topple it.
Rain it just drinks.
This tree is unwavering in its stance.
I stand as this tree does.
Though I stand beneath the same sky as many,
I am on my own.
I bleed and cry, laugh and sing, as others do,
But I in my solitude stand alone and stand strong.