

Soldier killed in Iraq deserves your thanks today

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By Capt. David W. Eastburn

FOR THE *COLUMBUS DISPATCH*



Jeremy Bagwell

Army Capt. David Eastburn grew up in Upper Arlington.



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Army Sgt. John Sullivan, 22, was killed on Dec. 30, 2006.

Growing up in Upper Arlington, I remember when Memorial Day meant a long weekend, cookouts and the opening of the public pool. I would have been hard-pressed to explain what Memorial Day represented throughout the first 18 years of my life. It has a much deeper meaning since the events of Dec. 30, 2006.

That's the day that Army Sgt. John Michael Sullivan was killed by an explosive-formed projectile, the most lethal roadside bomb in Iraq. He was conducting security patrols in the lower Karada district of eastern Baghdad.

He was 22 and on his second tour in Iraq. His son, John Michael Sullivan Jr., was born the next day.

John's widow, Michele, buried the Hixson, Tenn., native in the Chattanooga National Cemetery on a cold day in January 2007.

I met John on a Friday in May 2006. We were part of the 2nd Infantry Division out of Fort Carson, Colo., and I knew he was a soldier I wanted to be around. I was accounting for all of my unit's equipment at the time. He was in his room, looking for some extra gear to lend to a fellow soldier. Always respectful, he chatted with me for a minute about his interests and life and how he liked his job. That's when I found the man I would entrust with my life.

After learning that John not only was a hard worker but also loved to fix cars and trucks, I selfishly snatched him from the ranks of the gun line he loved to become my driver. It was a job he would hate, but because of the man he was, John would tell me it wasn't that bad.

The commander's driver is a position of reward, but also one of hard work. John thrived in his new position. He not only kept me out of trouble, but also set the example for his fellow soldiers in every way possible. John was a hard worker and a leader. People wanted to be around him.

During one late-night training mission, two of my platoons were conducting a simulated raid on a village. When simulated heavy machine-gun fire erupted, John pulled a humvee between the village and the truck I was in, shielding me and the other leaders from machine-gun fire. As a result, I was able to continue to direct a platoon to take out the enemy.

It was the kind of selfless act that John would undertake in battle. He always put the needs of others before his own.

My fondest memory of John is when he and I spent a month together in my humvee at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, Calif. We were together through every event. I never had to ask if he remembered pieces of gear: My radios were always ready, and he joked about the number of ice cubes he put in my water. He went above and beyond whatever I asked of him, and he never complained.

John loved when I told him we needed to hurry, because he liked to drive so fast.

During one journey, we hit so many bumps that the radio mounted on the back of the truck sheared off its mount and was plowing a furrow across the desert. We laughed for hours.

Soon after that, I had to let John go. He was due to be promoted to sergeant, and, as much as I wanted to keep him as a driver, I had to let him return to the guns and friends he loved.

The night John was taken from this world, he was doing what he loved with the friends he loved, for a cause he desperately believed in. The hardest thing I've ever done, and I'd venture to say the hardest thing I'll ever do, was to tell John's best friends, his brothers in arms, that he wasn't coming back.

When we lose a soldier, we always talk about the good, but I can tell you, as the man who commanded the unit, I've never seen anything like the love for John Sullivan from everyone who was lucky enough to know him.

As I sit here today, no longer in command of the Blacksheep Battery and preparing for a new chapter of my Army career, I can tell you without hesitation that no day goes by that I don't think about my friend John. In a world of chaos and turmoil, we need more John Sullivans. It would be a better place.

So this Memorial Day weekend, I would ask you to take a minute to think about my friend and the nearly 4,100 other heroes who have been taken from us far too early. But I'd also ask you to enjoy your weekend and give thanks to the heroes from every military conflict this great nation has fought in. That is what this weekend is all about.

Enjoy your day. Have a beer for John, and share his story -- the story of a hero, a man, a husband, father, son and brother. I know that he would want nothing more than for everyone to enjoy their day and have a cold one for him.

Thank you, John. You've made me a better person just by knowing you, and your memory shapes the man I'll be.

Capt. David Eastburn is a Columbus native and a 1994 graduate of Upper Arlington High School. He was the battery commander for 2nd Battalion, 17th Field Artillery (Light) "Blacksheep" from May 2006 to July 2007. He is a public affairs officer at Army Pacific Command headquarters, Fort Shafter, Hawaii.

david.w.eastburn@us.army.mil