

This is a story about Army Staff Sgt. Bryan A. Burgess who died on March 29, 2011 serving during Operation Enduring Freedom. This is a speech that his father, Terry Burgess, gives at events.



For those who may not know, a Gold Star Mom or Dad is one that has had a family member killed in service to their country. My wife, Elisabeth, and I are only one of the 6,841 Gold Star Families and each of their fallen heroes from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While it's an honor to be speaking to other Gold Star Families I don't even try to claim to be speaking for all of them because while each of our stories as a Gold Star Family has the same tragic beginning, each story, each family, and each hero is different.

My story is about my son, Bryan, and how we dealt with becoming a Gold Star Family..



On March 29, 2011 I had a dream about Bryan. We were just walking side by side on a dusty, rocky road. Bryan was in full combat uniform and he was talking to me, but I couldn't really hear what he was saying to me. He smiled at me, took me by my elbow and guided me around a corner into an outdoor movie theater. We took our seats and there on the movie screen appeared Bryan in his Army Combat Uniform. The camera pulled back and I could see he was standing beside a glass coffin. He stepped into the coffin, laid down, and as soon as his helmet touched the white satin pillow he turned into little boy Bryan. Little boy Bryan sat up, stepped out of the coffin and became Bryan the soldier again. Bryan gave me a salute, that little half-smile I was so familiar with, and then the screen went blindingly white. I turned to look at Bryan in the seat beside me, but he was gone.

It was at that point that I woke up to the phone ringing. I got out of bed, pulled on my jeans and tee shirt and went into Beth's office to see who was calling so early in the morning. Beth was on the phone, crying. She handed me the phone and it was my daughter-in-law, Tiffany, telling me that Bryan had been killed in action in Afghanistan early that morning.

It was March 29, 2011 and our world had just been shattered.

After the attacks and the horror of 9/11 Bryan came to me and told me he wanted to fight back. He wasn't asking me. He was telling me. My son, who climbed trees, played sports, drove my old hot rod, and teased his little sister, was going to war to fight an enemy that had killed Americans on American soil. Bryan didn't know the victim's names, but he fully intended to avenge them.

Bryan graduated from Basic Training at Fort Benning, and we proudly watched him "turn blue" for the Infantry. He was stationed at Fort Lewis where he met Tiffany who became his wife, and he was assigned to the Deuce Four Stryker Brigade, and before we knew it he was deployed to Iraq. I did everything I thought a father should do while his son is serving our country. I bought an American

Flag to hang proudly in the front yard, we sent care packages of beef jerky and razors, we wrote letters and sent email back and forth, and I hung his photo in my cubicle at work. I knew Bryan was in harms way, but the thought was always shoved to a dark corner of my mind whenever I received a phone call or email from him.

Bryan served proudly, sending us letters of his accomplishments and of the soldiers he met along the way. That first year went slowly past, then Bryan was home again. We had a Welcome Home party for him and enjoyed hearing what few stories he could tell us.

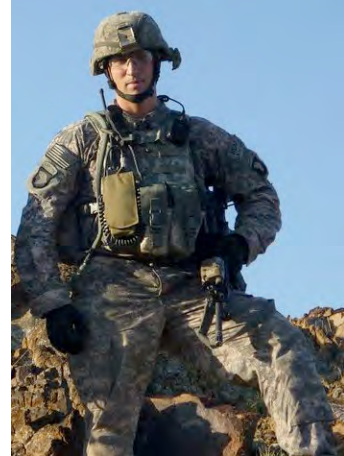


Bryan was then assigned to the US Army Garrison in Grafenwoehr, Germany, where my granddaughter and grandson were born. And Bryan was again deployed to Iraq.

This time when he came home he was re-assigned to the 101st Airborne at Fort Campbell, KY. Bryan and Tiffany proudly became part of the No Slack family.

We celebrated Bryan's 29th Birthday on April 23rd at Fort Campbell, and then he got deployed to Afghanistan on Mother's Day, 2010. Shortly after Bryan was deployed to Afghanistan, Tiffany had given us a banner with a blue star on a white field framed with a red border and fringed with gold trim that we hung in our front window. She had told us that it represented a family member deployed in military service. I had no idea there was one of these banners with a Gold Star on it.

Bryan had served his country with three tours, he'd been promoted regularly, he had survived explosions and attacks, he had always come home. He was 16 days from his next leave. Less than a month from his 30th birthday. And now he was gone. No last goodbyes. Nothing. My mind frantically raced trying to remember the last words we'd said to each other. The next few days were a jumble of travel arrangements by our CAO. We remember flying to Dover for Bryan's dignified transfer and us staying at the Fisher House, but not much else.



At Bryan's funeral at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Brigadier General Colt pinned a Gold Star on each one of us. There were tears in his eyes as he pinned one on me, Bryan's mom, his sister, his wife, both of his children and Bryan's step-mom and step-dad. We had become a Gold Star Family.

At our home, the banner with the Blue Service Star is now gone. In its place hangs a banner with a Gold Star on a white field framed with the red border and fringed with gold trim. We wear our Gold Star pins whenever possible, sharing Bryan's story and raising American citizen's awareness of the price and the cost of our freedom. Deep in my heart, I pray that those I meet will never know just how heavy this little Gold Star really is.

After Bryan's funeral and after the Eagle Remembrance Ceremony, we were left with an urn, a folded flag, and a hole in our hearts. I was unemployed at the time, and now my life had been

completely shattered. As the days and weeks went on I could barely get out of bed in the mornings, and when I did it was only to drink and self-medicate.

I thank God that I married a woman strong enough to carry two broken hearts.

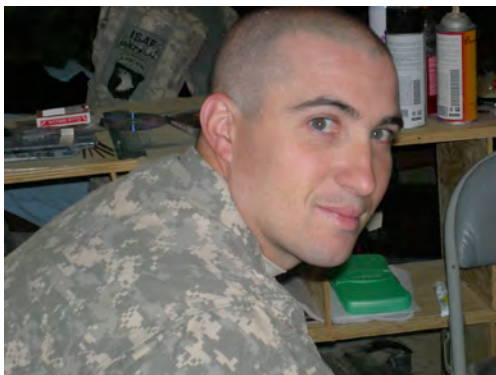
Then Beth got a phone call from Army Chaplin Justin Roberts. He told us that an ABC News war correspondent, Mike Boettcher, and his son Carlos of Oklahoma City had taken footage of No Slack during Operation Strong Eagle III, which was Bryan's final mission, and they were having the footage made into a documentary. Chaplin Roberts and Doc Jacobs, one of the Medics who had been a good friend of Bryans, had some film of Bryan that he was going to send to the producer and he wanted our permission.

A few weeks later we get a phone call from David Salzberg, Jr. who tells us—in his very thick Boston accent—that he is the movie producer that worked with Chaplin Roberts and he has a film he'd like us to see. David lives in Los Angeles and said he was flying to Dallas to meet with some people about financing the film, but he wanted us to see it first.

So, Beth gets me cleaned up and dressed and we drive to the Palomar Hotel in Dallas, where we meet David, and he puts the movie on and we settle in with not a clue about what we are about to witness. David graciously leaves the room and we watch the film in stunned silence.

As the movie ends, David comes back into the room and he sits down in front of us, patiently waits for us to dry our eyes, and then he asks us, "What do you think?"

David wanted our approval to go ahead with the production of the film. We gave it to him without hesitation because we had just seen Bryan on screen, talking about his children and how much he missed them. We had just seen things that Bryan had never told us about and never would have told us. We had just seen his entire unit being attacked by these unseen forces. We had just seen how his unit reacted to the information that their brothers were falling in battle. We had just seen heroics that left us totally shaken.



David could not have possibly known it at the time, but he and The Hornet's Nest team, had just saved my life. He had given me a reason to get out of bed every day. Mike and his son Carlos had given me a precious gift. They had given Bryan's children a legacy, a chance to hear their Daddy say their names again, a chance to see what Daddy did and why he died.

Over the next few months, we attended several screenings of the film across the country. We have had the bitter-sweet honor of meeting other Gold Star Families, especially the families of the other five warriors killed on March 29, 2011. Spc. Jameson Linskog; Sgt First Class Ofren Arrechaga; SSG Frank Adamski; SPC Dustin Feldhaus; PFC Jeremy Faulkner. We met, and became friends with, Bryan's fellow soldiers and his commanders. Bryan's Captain, Tye Reedy, surprised us by naming his first born son after Bryan.

At the G.I. Film Festival in Washington, D.C. we got to meet the Hornet's Nest team and had the pleasure of meeting Wynonna Judd and her husband Cactus. One of the songs in The Hornet's Nest, Chariots, was written for Bryan's last words as he and Medic Eric Matheson waited for the MEDEVAC to arrive, and the Hornet's Nest band, Politik, performed the song that night. Beth and I were holding hands and crying as the band played Chariots and suddenly Beth was being hugged by someone behind her. She turned to hug them back and it was Wynonna, with tears in her

eyes, saying she was praying for us. After Wynonna and Cactus saw 'The Hornet's Nest, they were so inspired by Capt. Kevin Mott's order, that she and Cactus wrote the award winning song Follow Me. It was a wonderful, amazing, emotional evening, watching the audience's reaction to 'The Hornet's Nest and seeing their awareness being raised.

The late evening ended with a few of us going for drinks. Beth and I sat next to Wynonna and Cactus and talked about Bryan. Wynonna is a—unique—person when you get to know her well, but when it comes time for a D.C. bar to close, no one is exempt. So, Beth and I had the unique pleasure of getting kicked out of a Washington D.C. bar with Wynonna Judd and Cactus. We had the honor of screening 'The Hornet's Nest for Easter Seals and 'The Dixon Center on the USS Intrepid in New York City. We screened it in Oklahoma City with Mike and Carlos. We were with the team at the NAPA Valley Film Festival and again at Sony Studios in Los Angeles. Beth and I even hosted one by ourselves in Abilene, Texas. And every time we see the film, it feels like our hearts are being torn apart. Some of our family attended one of the screenings and afterwards they asked us “Why do you do this to yourselves? Why do you torture yourselves by showing and watching this over and over?”

The answer to that question is the same answer to the question I had asked myself as I looked at Bryan's flag-draped coffin. “How can I possibly live up to my son's sacrifice?” This is how; by talking to you today and sharing his story. By doing what I think Bryan was trying to tell me in my dream; to not mourn my little boy. That innocent little boy died when he became a soldier. Bryan wants me to celebrate his life, understand his sacrifice, and enjoy my freedom.

As much as I ache to, I can't re-write the ending of 'The Hornet's Nest. But thanks to David and Christian and Mike and Carlos I have been able to re-write how I handle Bryan's sacrifice. By telling Bryan's story, and by listening to the stories of other Gold Stars and those of the men and women who have served, our heroes, our loved ones, will never be forgotten.

-Terry Burgess