

# The Whole Story... CPL Dustin Derga

Cpl Dustin A Derga, USMC

1st Platoon, Lima Company, 3rd Battalion 25th Marines from Columbus OH

Born: August 18, 1980. Home: Pickerington, OH

Killed In Action Mother's Day, May 8, 2005 in New Ubaydi Iraq, near the Syrian border, during Operation Matador

Dustin's gave his life while conducting house-to-house searches with his unit. Insurgents opened fire with machine guns from inside the house as Dustin's fire team was opening the front door. Dustin was hit in the back by an armor-piercing round that tore through the exterior walls of the house. Three additional members of Dustin's fire team were wounded during the firefight, one seriously. Members of the unit laid suppression fire, as Dustin lay unconscious near the doorway. A wounded Marine carried him to safety and shortly after he was transported by helicopter to a field hospital. Dustin died in route. He was the first of 23 Marines and Navy Corpsmen killed in action during Lima Company's 7-month deployment.

Many view that as his story..... In fact the end of Dustin's life has so very little to do with the story. Dustin's story is everything that proceeded that fateful moment in the Iraqi desert. It is also what has happened since. I want people to remember Dustin for who he was and how he lived his life. I also want them to know he is still impacting people today in ways I never dreamt possible. When people see his name, I want them to know the whole story, not this single chapter.

Where does one begin to tell the story about my hero, my son? He was a simple person but he had so many complex dimensions that defy definition. I will try to share with you a little bit about him but I know my words will fall short.

Dustin was a unique young man, but was also made of the same American fabric common to many of our fallen heroes. He was all boy. He loved playing "army" with his GI Joes as a child while wearing his "cammies". Dustin also loved playing baseball and was an excellent pitcher and catcher. He was the happiest when he was working with his hands...making something unique or fixing something broken. Dustin was not afraid of trying the impossible and pushed the envelope of life every chance he got. He loved his mom, his sister, his girlfriend, his step-mom, and me. He loved helping people and doing what others couldn't or wouldn't do. He loved his country and willingly took an oath to defend it at all cost, including his life. Most of all Dustin loved life...every heartbeat!

Dustin always said as a youngster he was going to grow up to be either a soldier or a fireman. In 1999, weeks after Dustin's graduation from Pickerington High School, he headed off to the uncertainty of Parris Island, the place Marines are born. In the weeks that followed he faced the Crucible and received his Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. He earned the right of passage into the brotherhood of the Marine Corps. There he learned the importance of putting others ahead of self and the meaning of honor, courage, and commitment. Most important he learned

that any dream is possible if you put your heart and soul into it and believe in yourself. When I asked him why he joined the Corps, the answer was simple. "I want to be part of the best." .....nothing more, nothing less. Dustin had a simple way of saying it all with wisdom far beyond his young years.

Dustin was torn between joining the Marine Corps and pursuing his other passion of becoming a firefighter. He chose both by applying for the Marine Reserves and enrolling at Columbus State University to pursue a degree in fire science. While he was completing his studies, Dustin became a volunteer fire fighter at Basil Township. He was thrilled when he earned his fire card and was allowed to actually go into a burning building. Dustin wanted it all and wasn't going to compromise anything. At times he wasn't certain about where his life was taking him, but when he would calm his head and listened to his heart amazing things always followed.

Dustin had an uncanny ability to make you forget about your troubles and have you laughing over the craziest things when you least expected it. You could never stay mad at him. His contagious smile and dimple would melt your heart in seconds and soon you would completely forget what made you upset. I think Dustin used that trait to his advantage. His fellow Marines commented Dustin didn't take things too seriously except on missions. They said he had a gift of making the toughest times a little easier with his laughter and crazy antics. Virtually every picture of him in Iraq showed him smiling even though he sorely missed home, cool spring breezes, and home cooked food. Dustin complained about the hardships but always made others forget about them through his gift of laughter.

Dustin lived life to the fullest. I know with certainty he is now with God, he is OK and I will see him again someday. The hardest part as a Gold Star parent is the waiting for that day, the someday. It is so hard starting each day without his voice, ending the day without his smile. Grief can consume you if you let it. I choose not to let that terrorist act also destroy me. I will not give them the satisfaction. I choose to follow Dustin's example and make the most of each day. I choose not to let Dustin's story end with that scene in New Ubaydi. I tell his story, I share the lessons he has taught me, but most important I reach out in pain to comfort the pain of other Gold Star families and returning troops. In doing that my pain is always lessened.

We now stand in the gap for Dustin.....his story continues through us and the other lives he has touched. As you grow old and raise children you often think they will become your legacy. How ironic I have become the legacy of my son.

When you see the name of a fallen hero, realize there is more to the story than a name and date of death. Take the time and learn about the lives of our heroes. Don't focus on their untimely ending. I promise you knowing their entire story will enrich your life.

Bob Derga  
Proud Gold Star Father of Cpl Dustin Derga, USMC