

Dear Matt,

This is how it has been since you left us, our son, and how it is today.

It was Monday, Dec. 11, 2006, 7:30 p.m. There was a knock on the door. It must be UPS, I thought, delivering the Marine Corps flag you promised us for Christmas. At the door, not the UPS, but two Marines in dress blues.

“Are you Neal Dillon, father of Cpl. Matthew Vincent Dillon?” Immediately I knew why they were there. I wanted to scream, “No, go away!” but I whispered, “Yes.”

“We regret to inform you” but before he could finish, I asked, “Is our son dead?”

He continued, “We regret to inform you that your son was killed in action today in Iraq.”

Again, I asked, hoping for a different answer, “There must be some mistake, are you sure?”

They met me with quiet expressions of regret and the gentle warning that we should not cling to hope. “There was no mistake,” he said.

How can I tell you how much like death was life at that instant? I remember picturing you as clearly as ever I have seen you, in all the ways I’ve ever seen you – as a tiny infant drooling on my shoulder, as a toddler taking your first uncertain steps, as a Little Leaguer straining to get a hit. I saw you grown, a man blooming with pride in your Marine Corps uniform, so strong and tough, and yet, openly sentimental; and I thought, You, Matt, dead? It was preposterous, a lie!

Yet, there was your mother, wavering before me as the wreckage a woman is when she has lost her child, and I could lay hold of nothing to fend off her pain. The agony was unbearable, crippling. I was unable to take her in my arms or even to speak to her.

Time passed before I could react enough to gather in Mom. I held her like a broken doll. In my arms she fell into a quivering panic and it was as though she grasped she would be living out her days in a sad, empty house. How could she or I have outlived you when you were meant to inherit us?

Soon the telephone was ringing. People came flooding in. Dishes of food appeared on the cabinet, flowers popped up from the floor and it had begun, the terrible nine days of sobbing on our pillows, of escapes to the back porch for private grief, of alternating collapse and recomposure so critical it menaced even the will to accept the next breath, while we awaited the return of your remains from Iraq.

It is difficult to tell you about those first few weeks or to even separate one day from the other. Mom was in a continuous fog and I experienced sudden fantasies where the enemy who killed you materialized in opportune reach of my hands that sought savage revenge for your death.

Mom never slept. She would lie staring at the darkness remembering the mother things, taking tearful inventory of the treasures she had been storing in her heart since the morning you were born.

Sometimes exhaustion stunned me into periods of stupored rest and they were hateful. At each awakening the news of your death struck me afresh as if with every sunrise you had died again right before my eyes. Everything prompted us to recollection, your clothes hanging in the closet, the roar of your motorcycle in the driveway, your quiet laughter and beautiful singing echoing throughout the house. We heard you in our talk through the ridiculous nicknames and lighthearted phrases you invented and installed so deeply in the family language, that now, hard as we tried, we could not avoid them.

Hundreds of people came by or called to speak well of you. There were mountains of mail, including letters from your commanding officer, commandant of the Marine Corps, the secretary of Defense and President Bush. You would be pleased to know that Col. Oliver North sent flowers, two uplifting letters and several phone calls.

You would also be honored to know that the James L. Hammons, Detachment 939, Marine Corps League, established the "Corporal Matthew V. Dillon Scholarship Award" that is presented to an outstanding JROTC cadet of each Aiken County High School; that Francis Wardlaw Academy, your high school, established a scholarship in your memory presented to an outstanding senior; that the USMC established the "Corporal Matthew V. Dillon Leadership Award" presented to military police school graduates displaying outstanding leadership, and that local area Purple Heart recipients founded the "Military Order of the Purple Heart, Corporal Matthew Vincent Dillon Memorial Chapter, 2005."

Do you remember the talk we had the day before you deployed? "I'll be back, but if I should fall, I want to be buried a Marine in my dress blues," you told us.

That was how we did it. We buried you three days before Christmas. You had Marines like gleaming statutes as an honor guard, Marines firing a 21-gun rifle volley and taps at the cemetery. You would have been proud of your Mom keeping her head high with only a few mute tears streaking down her cheeks as she accepted, in the place of a son, the flag off your coffin.

Much later the details of your death came to us. After completing 36 combat patrols where you survived several firefights and IEDs on your 37th combat patrol your unit was conducting operations in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq in the town of Al Khalidiyah. You were the fire team leader and Humvee turret gunner. At 1640 hours, Iraqi time, while passing under an overpass, the patrol came under small arms fire. As you were returning fire, killing two of the enemy, your Humvee was struck beneath by a powerful IED. You died from the blast. Because of the fire that erupted from the Humvee gas tank and the several hundred rounds of ammunition in your turret that continued to cook off, it was several hours later before your body could be recovered. Two others of your crew, Lance Cpls. Clinton Miller and Bud Cote, died with you and two others were seriously injured from burns. On that day, you were among the few, the proud that made the supreme sacrifice. For this you were awarded your second Purple Heart with Gold Star.

You would like knowing that your unit requested and held a memorial service for you in Iraq and at Miramar; that they nominated you for your citation and decoration. How splendid of you, our son, to have given yourself as you did; to have willed us this boundless piece of gallantry as our inheritance.

Thinking on it helps ease the awareness of how that blast blew apart the life-plan you had built and kept with us; of how there died with you a thousand family dreams.

I write this letter with vaulting pride. Bravery was like you. I remember it manifest in you always, from the time you took on that formidable neighborhood bully, who was several years older than you, and your big brother, Mike, had to finish the job, on through the first Purple Heart you received in Iraq in 2003.

Thinking of you on the day before your deployment to Iraq – I am compelled to the question that has twisted inside me like a dagger since the moment I knew you were gone. Did not we, it asks, we, your parents, point you toward this death? Did not we, out of our own unqualified love of country and rigid definition of duty, actually rear you to die at war?

Perhaps, we did. From the first we taught you reverence for the flag, the law, our traditions and institutions. We told you of your family's history of service and sacrifice in WW II, Korea and Vietnam. Your brother, Rob, who served with you in Operations Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and later in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, is now serving our country as a brigade commander at Fort Hood, Texas.

We imparted to you an unequivocal confidence in our system of government, trained you to the habit of everyday joy in your citizenship. We encouraged your development into an aggressive competitor for excellence. We saw to it you would regard the defense of your homeland and the support of its commitments, not as a duty, but as a privilege. We approved of how your career intention always included a time for the military as a mandate of conscience, an essential of your self-respect. There was never a doubt you would enlist. Nor, was there much doubt, in view of your compulsion to make the first team that you would serve as a Marine.

I still lie awake at night and wonder if every teaching from us did not somehow move you toward the cruel appointment with death you kept in the dirty streets of Al Khalidiyah. We deliberately cultured in you the currently unfashionable belief that each person is responsible for himself, that a man is the fabricator of his own consequences. We told you failure is a personal affair, not to be laid off on poverty, race, gender, associates or influences. You listened well. You accepted yourself at what you had to work with and granted yourself no excuses.

It was natural, then, that you should have considered Iraq not debatable. That your country had pledged itself was sufficient. After 9/11 you reacted exactly as other young Americans preceding you by over half of a century had responded after Pearl Harbor.

So, you were orthodox. In a sense, I suppose, you belonged to the generation of over half a century ago. But, on that unendurable Wednesday, with the terrible cost of our handcrafted patriotism there before us in the cemetery, we had to ask ourselves whether we had meant what we had preached; whether we would continue meaning it down through the bleak years to which your passing has condemned us to. If granted a second chance, would we repeat the course? Or, would we find ways to permit and justify, consent and retract, knowing that the resultant irresponsibility might, like a foul-smelling serum, save

your life?

No, our son, we could not have given you an exempted conscience, could never have consigned you to the company of those that know no higher cause than themselves. We prefer the tearful sorting out of your personal things shipped to us after your death, the sorrowful laying away of your life's expectations, the brokenhearted pilgrimages to your grave. Yes, we would do it again.

There remains, then, just this, how, our son, how do we say farewell?

The Bradford pear and crepe myrtle trees we planted by your grave are doing well, and it appears they are near to blooming this spring. We proudly wear our wristbands with your name, fly U.S. and Marine Corps flags in the front yard, we have your boots and medals in a display case in the den and your dress blues hang in a shadowbox in the living room. We are keeping fresh the good memories, and more often now, as we speak of you, it is with joy. The family and friends, who loved you and buried you, thank you forever.

America has had no better than you. And you were ours.

Goodbye, Matt, Goodbye.