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## A Small Town Grieves Over a Favorite Son

Marine Made a Difference in Stuart, Va.

By Carol Morello

Washington Post Staff Writer

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STUART, Va. -- When Marine Cpl. Jonathan Bowling came home from Iraq, the entire town closed down to grieve.

More than 5,000 people from Stuart and the surrounding countryside waited hours on a snowy February night to pay their respects to his family -- too many for the funeral home to accommodate, so his coffin was placed in the auditorium of Patrick County High School where he had graduated five years earlier. The next day, stores closed as hundreds of residents lined the streets to watch the hearse pass by. Many saluted and cried, waving flags and banners, saying, "We love you, Jon Boy."

In this town of 1,000 in southern Virginia, where everyone is connected, the only son of Darrell Bowling and Robin Feron seemed to belong to them all.



Cpl. Jonathan W. Bowling

"You spend all those years watching a kid grow into someone you're proud to have around, and just like that, he's gone, in the blink of an eye," said Mary Alley, proprietor of the Coffee Break diner, where Bowling used to eat cheeseburgers. "Losing Jon has made a lot of us bitter about the war."

Though Bowling was only 23, he had touched many lives. So his death on Jan. 26 when a rocket-propelled grenade struck his Humvee left a sense of loss in many corners here.

As a volunteer firefighter and rescue worker, he rushed into burning buildings and pulled motorists from wrecks. He worked as a police officer in nearby Martinsville, and he had been an elder in his church from the age of 14.

Small things provided an equal measure of the man. He visited elderly relatives. At the local produce stand, he helped ladies load groceries into their cars. When he noticed a wobbly table at the Downtown Cafe, he came around with a wrench to fix it.

"He always sat in the corner booth by the window," said owner Harold Slate. "People say they can't look at that booth now without seeing him there."

Slate's wife, Susan, has ordered a brass plaque with Bowling's name to mount on the wall above the booth. "He was too good to be true," she said.

Stuart, named for the Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart, has always sent its sons off to war. On the courthouse lawn, the World War II memorial bears 64 names. The Vietnam War memorial lists seven men who did not come home.

High unemployment has caused many of Stuart's young to seek opportunities in the military. Almost everyone knows someone who has been in Iraq or Afghanistan, or who is about to go.

A yellow ribbon is still tied to a tree trunk outside the log house where Bowling lived with his father. Above it is a black ribbon.

Darrell Bowling remembers when his son, who joined the Marine Reserves after graduation, was about to be deployed to Iraq. The father is a state trooper, and he offered to make some calls to see if Jonathan could be assigned to a military police unit that might be less likely to see action.

"Jon stopped me cold," he recalled. "He said, 'What will I tell my grandchildren? My daddy kept me out of it?' He felt it was his duty. Nobody could stop him."

As a trooper, Darrell Bowling is an Andy-of-Mayberry type, more likely to issue a stern lecture than a ticket. Now he has trouble writing any tickets at all; everyone he stops for speeding hugs him.

Father and son shared a dream that Jonathan would follow in his father's footsteps.

"It was my hope he would take care of folks around here, after I'm gone," Bowling said. "I've lost a big part of my life. All my plans included him."

From Iraq, Jonathan called family and friends in Stuart every two or three days, usually in what was the middle of the night for him.

He talked with his mother about his Scottish terrier, Mac. She was watching the dog until his return.

"We never talked about the war," said Robin Feron, cradling Mac in her arms. "We kept the conversation light. As a mother, I wanted to ask questions. As a mother, I couldn't."

In the entryway to her house, Feron keeps her son's dress blue Marine jacket and his white cap hanging on a coat rack, as if waiting for him to come back and try it on. For weeks, she could not eat steak, because it was his favorite food. Recently, she and her husband, Gregg, had a steak dinner as a hallmark of trying to move on. She often looks out her back window at the white bench where he sat during cookouts.

"I feel him there," she said.

His twin sisters, Brooke and Ashley, are attending college. He took out an insurance policy before he left for Iraq and directed that the money should pay for their educations. They are the future, he wrote in a letter he mailed to a family friend to be opened if "the worst" happened.

Before Jonathan Bowling's death, many people in Stuart thought of the war as a remote conflict played out on television. Now, it feels personal.

"In the abstract, we all want democracy and freedom, and we all want terrorism punished," said Bernie K. Day, a bank vice president. "But if you say, 'Give me Jon,' well, maybe we'll back up and discuss that question a little bit."

At the Coffee Break, it's hard to find anyone who now thinks the war was worth giving Jon.

"The whole thing we're doing over there is not worth one Jonathan, much less 1,500," said Mary Alley.

Several memorials are planned. An April 23 motorcycle ride will raise money for a scholarship in his name. His death is the inspiration for a "wall of honor" in the county building, that will list Stuart's war dead back to the Revolutionary War. An American flag will go up on a wall in the Martinsville Police Department, in a shadowbox with his name on it.

Clint Weidhass, Jon Bowling's best friend from childhood, plans to make his life's work a personal tribute. This summer, Weidhaas will start training at the state police academy for a job he and Jonathan had talked about doing together one day.

"When I think of Jon, and how he served his country and helped people, I feel compelled to do this," he said. "Jon wanted me to do this, and work with him. Now I'll do it alone."

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

## Marine is laid to rest

Friday, February 4, 2005

By DEBBIE HALL - Bulletin Staff Writer

About 800 people filled the auditorium at Patrick County High School for the funeral for Bowling, who aspired to follow in his father's footsteps and become a Virginia State Trooper. On Thursday, that dream was realized.

According to a proclamation by Gov. Mark Warner to the family, Bowling was named an honorary Virginia State Trooper.

"Now Jon has his own place among our ranks," said Colonel W. Steve Flaherty, superintendent of the Virginia State Police.

A copy of that proclamation, with an affixed photo of Jon, will be placed in the Richmond headquarters of the Virginia State Police.

Darrell Bowling spoke during the funeral, sharing his thoughts shortly after learning that his son had made the ultimate sacrifice.

"The magnitude of it became apparent," Bowling said, adding that a multitude of worries arose in the midst of the grief.

"But I need not have worried. True to form, Jon left a letter with a mutual friend," Darrell Bowling said. The letter began with "If you are reading this, you know ..."

In the letter, Jon expressed his desires for his funeral arrangements, dispersal of his personal property and other pertinent information "right down to the last detail," his father said.

Jon Bowling also provided "in a very special way, for his sisters," Darrell Bowling said, reading an excerpt from the letter that included, "Look to the future. It all lies in Brooke and Ashley (twin sisters). They need you both to be there for them."

The letter closed with "I love you both very much ... I couldn't have had better parents," Darrell Bowling said.

Jonathan Bowling also was the son of Robin Pilson Bowling Feron and the stepson of Rita Goad Bowling and Greg Feron, all of Stuart.

"One of the hardest tasks a parent can face is burying a child," Darrell Bowling said. "I'm standing up here not because I want to, but because it's the very last thing I can do for my son."

The expression Bowling said he heard most often from those attending family night on Wednesday was "God bless you."

"And we have been blessed" he said, by knowing Jonathan, having him as a son and sharing his life.

"He couldn't sit still. He couldn't slow down. If Jon made up his mind he wanted to do something, he did it," Darrell Bowling said. He "was the king of the hill ... until he was about 4 years old. Then came Ashley and Brooke and his life was never the same."

Darrell Bowling recounted an event which happened when Jon was about 7 or 8, while father and son were on an outing to town and the girls were at home.

"Brooke and Ashley were very young and one of the things they delighted in was invading their big brother's room," Darrell Bowling said.

When Darrell and Jon Bowling returned home, Jon went to his room "and found one of his prized possessions broke," Darrell Bowling said. "He sailed in on the two girls and I had to separate them."

Darrell Bowling sent Jon to his room "to cool down," he said. Later, Jon "appeared to have recuperated."

But when Ashley went to her room, she found her favorite doll "sporting a fresh, new buzz cut. Brooke's doll received an immediate attack of baldness also," Darrell Bowling said amid chuckles from listeners.

But that changed as the children got older.

"They got closer and closer and closer," Darrell Bowling said.

In another story, Jon was about 16. He and his sisters were preparing to "go to town. It was their first brother-and-sister trip."

They stopped at W&W Produce to get gas for the car. After filling up, Jon realized he had left his wallet at home and had no money to pay for the gas.

Darrell Bowling said he heard Jon pull back onto the driveway and Jon told him he had forgotten the wallet.

Looking into the car, Darrell Bowling said, "Well, Brooke's in there, but where is Ashley?" Jon replied, "I told you I didn't have any money with me and I had already filled the car up. I left her at W&W for collateral," he said.

"Jon just came that way, right out of the box," Darrell Bowling said of his son's character. Parenting him was a process "of tweaking him a little bit here and there, but he was hard-

headed enough to do it his way."

As Cpl. Jonathan Bowling's remains were loaded into a hearse for the drive to the Pilson family cemetery, law enforcement officers and members of the military stood vigil outside in the falling snow.

"Detail, present arms," a Marine said loudly, as Bowling's casket neared the hearse. At least half of the people attending Jon Bowling's funeral were members of the military or law enforcement agencies, both local and state. Some license plates were from as far as Maryland and Georgia.

The procession to the cemetery included about 265 vehicles. At least half were the marked cars of law enforcement. The normally 20-minute drive took more than an hour. There, Cpl. Jonathan Bowling was honored with a 21-gun salute.

His parents also received an award from President George W. Bush.

"The President of the United States awarded the Purple Heart to Cpl. Jonathan Williams Bowling for wounds received in action resulting in his death," said a Marine as he presented the award to Bowling's family.