

Excerpt: Chapter 10 of *Heart Of A Hawk: One family's sacrifice & journey toward healing* by Deborah Tainsh. (Elva Resa, May 2006) Reprinted with permission. www.heartofhawk.com

"I WONDER IF PATRICK would like to go to Disney World when he gets home?" Deborah was looking through a travel book at the various resorts close to the Disney theme parks in Orlando. "I think it'd be a lot of fun to take a family trip."

"He said he wanted to go to any resort we could find," Dave said. He was pushing back in his recliner to watch the *O'Reilly Factor* when the phone rang.

"Looks like Patrick," he said when he saw the caller ID.

Dave heard his son's cheery voice. "Hey Dad, I'm countin' the days! We're on the backside, now. Word is we'll be headed for Kuwait by mid-March and home by April."

"Well it's only the 10th of February. Just stay focused until you're out of there. Don't lose your edge. It ain't over until you hit the USA."

"I know, Dad. Don't worry."

"We're going to Disney World when you get home," Deborah said, holding the extension.

"Sounds like a winner to me. I'm ready to be anywhere but here for a while."

"Just hang in there, bud," Dave repeated. "Just keep your head on straight. And don't forget how much we love you."

"Me, too, Dad. I gotta go. Tell everybody I love and miss 'em. I'll call you later."

Dave placed the phone back in its cradle, as Deborah wrote *Pat called* on the calendar, never thinking it would be the last time they'd ever speak to their son.

Two days later, after watching television until two o'clock in the morning, Deborah fell asleep on the sofa. By six a.m. she was awake, thinking she must have dreamt that someone was pounding on the door. Looking toward the window next to the fireplace she saw it was still dark. She was turning on her side to return to sleep when she heard the pounding again. This time she heard a male voice calling for Sergeant Major Tainsh.

She felt muddled, but finally realized she wasn't dreaming. For a split moment the thought crossed her mind that it was one of Dave's former Marines pulling an early morning prank. After eighteen years, some of them had contacted him a few weeks earlier. In the old days in California, there were times when one or two of them would knock on the door looking for a place to sleep to keep from driving on the base after drinking a few beers. Hearing the bold knock again, Deborah threw off her blanket.

"Do you hear somebody banging on the door?" she called down the hall to her husband.

Having shifted abruptly into a sitting position, she felt nauseated. Her face turned cool, as though all the blood were rushing to her toes. Suddenly, with a pang of fright, her insides became a mass of jitters. She didn't want to move. When the knock sounded again, she shouted, "Just a minute" toward the door, and waited for Dave to come down the hall.

Dave had also thought he was dreaming until he heard his wife's voice. Alarmed, and trying to wake from a deep sleep, he pulled on his robe while yelling back to Deborah that he was on the way.

They reached the foyer entrance at the same time. Dave carried the pistol that stayed under the bed.

“What the hell?” he said as they approached the front door.

They lived in a nice section of the county, outside of town where nothing out of the ordinary ever happened. But there was always the first time, and Dave Tainsh wasn't one to take unusual occurrences lightly. Deborah flipped the switches that turned on the foyer and front yard lights. Looking out the long narrow window beside the door, all that Dave could say was, “Oh, hell,” and began shaking as Deborah repeated, “No, God, no,” over and over again.

There was only one reason for two men in Army dress greens to be standing at the door in the still dark morning. They were bringing a horrid message not worthy of sunlight. But this couldn't be possible. Just yesterday Dave had called Allstate to reinstate Patrick's car insurance. He had mailed a check to Fort Polk to the captain's wife to help buy soap and shaving cream to put in the barracks for the guys when they arrived home next month. But at that moment, Deborah knew death had truly appeared at their door like a thief in the night. It was 6:00 a.m., February 12th, 2004.

During the notification officer's announcement, “Sir, I'm sorry to inform you...,” Deborah's mind replayed a flood of memories. She and Dave had just discussed the trip to Fort Polk to meet the unit when they arrived in another fifty days or so. They had planned the trip to Disney World. The Christmas tree was still in front of the dining room windows with Patrick's gifts beneath it. Now, was someone actually telling them the sun would no longer rise? That overnight, the earth had stopped spinning on its axis? That gravity no longer existed? Deborah fell to her knees on the floor, her hands cupped to her face, catching the flood of tears. Dave stood in silence, his arms crossed in front of his chest as though the posture would repel the horrible truth.

The notification officer continued with, “I'm so sorry,” finally breaking the insane moments by asking, gently, if he and the chaplain could possibly come in.

Dave reached his hand to Deborah's, lifting her from her knees. Looking up to see her husband's face white as chalk, she grabbed his arm. Finally finding the words, she said, “I'm sorry, please come inside.”

Dave stretched the door open.

“We knew why you were here the moment we saw you,” Deborah said.

“Ma'am, I'm so sorry. This is the most difficult part of my job.”

The subdued chaplain and the notification officer, a young sergeant, removed their garrison caps, entered the foyer, and walked toward the family room. Deborah felt as though she and Dave were floating inside a bubble that would pop any moment, and the clock's hands would spin backwards. She examined her husband's chalky face, looking for signs of chest pains. After he and the two other men finally took seats, all she could think to do was make coffee for the three of them.

Wiping her swollen eyes and moving like a robot toward the kitchen, she knew she had to call Jason. After starting the coffee, she picked up the portable phone from the counter to dial his number. While watching the steady drip of coffee, she listened to several rings before her son answered his phone.

“We need you here at the house. It's Patrick.” She said as calm as possible.

“Mama, what's wrong?” Jason said in his raspy, early morning voice.

“Just come over, and drive careful.”

After placing the receiver back in its cradle, Deborah returned to the family room.

From his seat in the corner of the sofa, Dave finally found his voice. "What happened? And when?"

The chaplain, seated in the chair at the corner of the sofa where Dave sat, played nervously with his garrison cap. In the chair at the opposite end of the sofa, the young sergeant sat holding a manila folder.

The chaplain spoke. "It was an IED, sir, a roadside bomb. The unit was in convoy on a patrol in western Baghdad. We were told it occurred about twenty-two hundred hours, or ten p.m., last night."

"He wasn't supposed to be on more patrols. He was getting ready to come home." Dave gazed at the floor, disbelieving the words he heard.

"Sir, I'm so sorry," the chaplain said, with the soft voice of a man of the cloth.

For some reason, Deborah figured the time difference. It would have been around two p.m. at home. While she read to children at one of the schools, while Dave took in Fox News, their son had taken his last breaths. At some point in time before this morning, a banner had probably run at the bottom of the television saying, "Two soldiers killed today in western Baghdad, names withheld until notification of next of kin."

Deborah watched her husband, fearing where his state of mind might lead as he continued staring into the floor, as though burning a hole through it. She remembered the gun he had brought to the door. She walked to the dining room and found it on the chair where he had left it. Placing a throw blanket over the pistol, she took it to the back of the house and hid it in her closet. She returned to the family room, knowing it was up to her to get her husband through this.

With only dull lamp light in the large room and the sun still below the horizon, there was a thick oozing ugliness that couldn't be touched, only felt, draped heavily inside the room, consuming the bodies searching for words that didn't exist to answer questions or bring comfort. Deborah didn't know what a stun gun felt like, but nothing could be worse than the feeling that hovered in this room.

The sergeant finally spoke. The papers he held shook in his hands. "Sir, I understand you're Sergeant Tainsh's sole beneficiary, that his mother is deceased."

"Yes. She died when he was young," Dave responded, meeting the young man's eyes.

"Sir, then, if I could have you confirm the names and spelling on these forms and sign them, we can begin working on the death and burial benefits."

This can't be happening, Deborah kept thinking as she handed her husband his glasses. She watched the paper shake in Dave's hands. If there were ever a moment in her life where she felt outside her body, watching the most horrible scene that could ever occur involving those she loved, this was it.

She watched her husband force the black government pen across the designated lines, leaving his signature in small jerky cursive that resembled a child's.

With the forms completed, Deborah called Rose Hendrix. "Rose, this is Deborah Tainsh. I think we need you. We lost Patrick last night."

Rose hesitated a moment as though she hadn't heard correctly. Then she spoke.

"Oh, God, no, Deborah, this can't be right. I'll be right there. I'll do all I can."

Setting the receiver down, Deborah thought about how to best contact Patrick's grandmother, now in Miami, relatives in North Carolina, friends in California, and Kacee

in Afghanistan. She supposed the Red Cross could help with notifications to Miami and Bagram.

Seeing the full coffee pot, she poured three cups of coffee, placed them on a tray and took them into the family room. Offering the chaplain a cup, he smiled, saying, "You're not supposed to be doing things for me. I'm here for you."

"Just pray us through this," Deborah said.

While Deborah handed the cups to her husband and the sergeant, the chaplain walked to the family photo table where he picked up a picture of Patrick standing beside a Humvee in Baghdad.

"He's a handsome young man. I know you're proud of him."

"Yes sir, we are," Dave said.

"I'd like to pray with you."

At that moment, Deborah heard the back door open. Jason and Sindy entered the house from the garage, their eyes red and swollen.

"This ain't happening, I know it's not," Jason cried, hugging Deborah, then his stepfather. Deborah watched him move toward Patrick's eight-by-ten military photo that hung on the wall with years of other family photos. Tears flowed down her son's face as he gritted his teeth. With his muscular arms to his sides and fists folded tight, she knew he wanted to hit something.

"We just talked to him a couple of days ago," Sindy said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I can't believe this. He was coming home in a few more weeks."

Deborah reached her hand toward Sindy's. "I know," she said. "The chaplain would like to say a few words."

Jason moved next to Sindy. Deborah sat down next to her husband as the gray dawn swallowed the morning darkness and the chaplain, holding Patrick's photo, prayed.

Hours later and sleeping peacefully, Kacee thought she was dreaming when she heard her name being called.

"Yeah, what's going on?" she asked, rising to the side of her cot.

"The first sergeant needs to see you." Another female from her unit spoke from the entrance of the tent.

Kacee felt sure she was being awakened to receive a message from one of her sisters. She'd been expecting the death of her mother since before the deployment. Her mother was deteriorating from a stroke and Alzheimer's in a nursing home in Louisiana.

Kacee's bunkmate, Alice, was also awakened and followed Kacee to the first sergeant's office. The captain and a chaplain were waiting for her, faces long and grim in the dim light.

The first sergeant pulled out a chair, "I think you should sit down."

Kacee studied his somber look. He had been a longtime friend. She'd known him most of her ten years with the Guard.

To break the cold silence, Kacee said, "If someone called about my mom, it's okay. I knew it was coming."

After a moment, the first sergeant seemed to know nothing else to do but blurt out the awful words: "Patrick's been killed."

Kacee felt she'd been hit in her belly with the butt end of a rifle. Her head began to pound as though all the oxygen was being sucked from the room. She could hear her

heart beat in her ears, someone was holding a pillow tight against her face. She was fighting to breathe. She was frozen in a dark vault. She clutched the chair seat as tight as she could.

Everyone stared, waiting for her collapse. Only her tears had a will of their own.

“Are you sure?” she finally asked. “What happened?”

The first sergeant gave the information that had been received from the Red Cross. Shaking, but trying to remain composed, Kacee looked at Alice.

“I won’t let this destroy me. He wouldn’t want that.”

Alice stooped next to Kacee and placed her arms around her shocked friend’s shoulders. Kacee had often told her how Patrick was the first man she’d learned to trust and love since her divorce ten years before. “He’s brought me so far,” she said. “He taught me that I had to love myself before I could love anyone else. We were making plans for the future.”

A doctor stood by to make sure Kacee would be okay and could get back to sleep.

“This is a dream,” she finally said. “It has to be a dream. I have to call my sisters.”

Alice helped Kacee make the call to Atlanta before leading her back to the tent. Lying down, Kacee knew she wouldn’t be in Georgia for Patrick’s memorial. Their not being married would prevent that. All she could do now was try and keep her sanity until May, when her unit returned to the states. Too often since August she had stood to honor fallen soldiers in Afghanistan as military vehicles took flag draped caskets across the airstrip, and soldiers placed them on a plane for the final trip home. Now when they rolled past, she would see only Patrick.