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## Nothing can Replace our Son

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## 'Nothing can replace our son'

Steve Sammis and  
Rosemarie Dietz  
Slavenas both lost  
sons in Iraq – but their  
feelings about the war  
are very different,  
reports **Ian Kilroy**

**O**n a crisp day last spring, Steve Sammis, from Massachusetts, looked on as his son, Benjamin, was laid to rest. A soldier kneeled before him and presented him with the red, white and blue American flag, taken from where it had been draped over his son's coffin. A bugle played. Then, as Sammis stood amid the sea of white crosses that is Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, he was momentarily shaken out of his numb grief by an aircraft speeding by overhead, an overfly for his fallen son.

"He was buried with full military honours. It was extremely reverent, extremely symbolic. It was an overwhelming experience," Sammis says, his eyes full of emotion. "That day has left a lasting impression. It will stay with me forever."

Twenty-nine-year-old Benjamin W. Sammis was flying back to Kuwait on April 4th last when he learned of a group of US marines separated from their main unit. They were pinned down under heavy fire 40 miles south of Baghdad. Sammis turned his Cobra helicopter around and, with two other helicopters, returned to provide cover as the marines withdrew.

It was a battle zone. There was smoke and fire everywhere. Billowing flames made night-vision equipment useless; it was impossible to see. In the confusion, Benjamin flew directly into a Republican Guard observation tower. DNA samples were required to identify his remains.

Ten months later, Benjamin's father is still reliving the moments he first heard the news.

"It's that call that you never want to think you're going to get," he says. "That's when it comes. There's a knock on the door and you go to the window and it's 11.45 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. There's a marine major and sergeant standing out in front of your house. I look out the window and I say to my wife: 'Beth, there's a marine officer out in the yard.' We know at once what has happened."

What had happened was that Benjamin Sammis - like 536 or so other US soldiers to date - had been killed in one of the

most controversial wars of recent times. He left behind him a young wife, Stacey, and two brothers, as well as his parents. He had been an athlete and competitive sailor. He had loved soccer and had fulfilled the wish he'd had since the age of 10 to fly. Now his life was over. And since hearing of his death, life has been an agony for those closest to him.

"The only way to describe it is emotional torment," says Sammis. "Mostly

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it's torment. There's nothing you can do. Your life is never going to be the same again. We lost a son. Nothing can replace that."

Sammis wears a yellow ribbon as a constant reminder of his son. It is pinned to his clothing with the miniature crossed flags of the US and the US Marine Corps. The yellow ribbon means he wants the troops "to come home soon and come home safe", he says. It is a sentiment increasingly heard in small towns and on local radio stations across the US. Apart from campaigning groups such as Military Families Speak Out and Veterans Against the War, ordinary US citizens are questioning in greater and greater numbers the validity of being in Iraq. Sammis, however, remains supportive of US actions there.

"I believe in what we're doing," he says. "I know that Ben was doing his duty, what he was trained to do. Because of his actions there are countless marines alive today. I'm very proud of what he did. I'm very proud of how he stood as a person. I hold that same sense of pride and affection, that same support, for other American service personnel as well."

Sammis sees his son as a hero - as do the vast majority of Americans, both those in favour of and those against the war. He agrees that, in the context of public criticism of the war, his son's death is more difficult to bear than it

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**'The reason that you and I can sit here and talk like this is because people are willing to put their lives on the line,' says Steve Sammis.**

**Above: a US infantry bugler plays 'taps' in Arlington National Cemetery at the funeral of an American serviceman killed in Iraq.**

**Right: a grieving mother receives the US flag at the grave site of her son.**

**Photographs: Joe Raedle/ Getty Images**

would otherwise have been. But he is not prepared to join the growing chorus of criticism yet.

"There was an intelligence failure, apparently," he says. "But I don't think we have enough information to turn around and start pointing fingers yet."

For Sammis, the war in Iraq is about freedom and the prevention of terrorism.

"The reason that you and I can sit here and talk like this is because people are willing to put their lives on the line," he says. To fight terrorism, he adds, "means you've got to find out where they are, where they're planning their activities,

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who their leaders are – and kill them. Let's not be polite about it. You've got to find out who's supplying them, and get them. Unfortunately, you probably have to kill them too”.

His words are never spoken with anger, only with sadness.

“As a son, well, I couldn't have asked for more than Ben,” he says. “We shared a lot of good times.”

While Steve Sammis may not be angry, Rosemarie Dietz Slavenas certainly is. Her 30-year-old son, helicopter pilot Brian Slavenas, was shot down over Fallujah in November.

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“George Bush killed my son,” she says. “I believe my son died not for his country but because of our country's lack of a civilised foreign policy.”

On November 2nd, Brian Slavenas was flying over a civilian area of Fallujah that had been searched by the US army the night before. There was anger in the area about the search and as Brian flew over the next morning his helicopter was hit by a missile fired from a shoulder-held weapon. The massive helicopter went into a spin. The rear propeller was damaged and the back of the helicopter was a fireball. The aircraft crashed and 16 people were killed. While 20 others survived, Brian died half an hour after being admitted to a hospital in Fallujah.

“I was coming home from church when I heard that a helicopter had crashed in Iraq and that there were injuries,” says Rosemarie Dietz Slavenas. “Then when I came home there were two men in my yard. It was dark and they came towards my car. I could see one was a police officer and I asked him what happened. ‘The worst, the worst,’ he said. And I just began screaming ‘no, no, no’.”

Slavenas had been an active member of an anti-war group before her son went to Iraq. She still takes part in an anti-war/anti-occupation vigil every Friday in her small Illinois town. She says she cherishes the memories of her son, and cherishes too the letters she received

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from him only days after he died.

It is moving to hear her read from one of those letters. It is an ordinary letter, full of inquiries and hopes. He asks about the new home his mother has moved into and about their 17-year-old dog, Pepper.

"Pepper will have an 18th birthday in a few months," the letter says. "Maybe that old peppery pooh will make it to 20."

The letter is dated October 26th.

"Things are going well," it goes on. "Maybe we'll be home in April. I'm not sure."

A week later, Brian was dead, a year to the day before George W. Bush has to seek re-election.

Slavenas says her son tried and failed to get discharged from the military when he learned he was being deployed to Iraq. Her husband, from whom she is separated, contests this. She says that if her son had gone AWOL he would have spent two years in prison and be alive today. It is with bitterness that she now reads of her president's military career.

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died not for his  
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"It just came out in my local paper about the president and all the time he went missing from the military. I guess there's different rules for different folks," she says.

Her heart goes out to other families who have lost loved ones in Iraq, she says, a great number of whom have been killed since an end to hostilities was proclaimed on May 1st last. She thinks, too, of Iraqis who have lost their lives.

"They call it 'Iraqi Freedom'," she says. "But who knows how many Iraqis have been killed?"

Up to 10,000 Iraqi civilians, according to the latest estimates from independent think-tanks. The nature of US television coverage means that most Americans are unaware of this. There's even a prohibition on showing US coffins coming home. But as more and more of those coffins do arrive, people are starting to utter the most feared word in the Pentagon: "Vietnam". As in that earlier conflict, Americans are starting to question the motives behind US involvement.

"They've been sent there because we have an economic interest in Iraq," says Slavenas. "I think the loss of life is obscene, what's being done is obscene. It's more than needless."

She says that while she marched against the war with thousands all over the world this time last year she had no idea that so many would be dead only months later. The fact that one of those is her son has changed her life forever.

"He was such a beautiful, healthy young man," she says. "He never even smoked or drank. He was always a very athletic, positive person. When I saw the pictures of his helicopter, here he was, his beautiful, beautiful body broken. I couldn't look at it. I would have lost my mind."

Next Friday, like every Friday, Rosemarie Dietz Slavenas will again be demonstrating.

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