



## A Tale of Two Sons

John Holley and I lost our sons under completely different circumstances. My son, Joshua, died a little over four years ago, after a prolonged battle with bone cancer. John's son, Matthew, was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq less than a year ago. We lost Josh a few weeks before his eighteenth birthday. Matt Holley was twenty-one years old. Matthew died in combat. Joshua passed away in his own bed. My family had nearly two years to prepare emotionally for the end of Josh's life. John and Stacey Holley's only warning was the unexpected ring of a doorbell and the arrival of uniformed strangers at their front door.

I wrote a [column](#) about the Holley family at the beginning of this year, just a few weeks after Matthew's death. John and Stacey were still oscillating between pride in Matthew's service and the extraordinary trauma of his loss, when they received some disturbing news about the military's plans for returning their son's remains. Matthew's body was being shipped to San Diego as freight on a commercial airliner. A Soldier would fly in the passenger cabin to act as escort for the body, but there would not be a military honor guard at Lindbergh Field. There would be no ceremony to mark the return of a fallen Soldier to the soil of his country. John and Stacey wouldn't even be allowed to meet their son's remains on the runway. They were told that they could claim his casket from the holding area for oversized luggage, after the suitcases and the rest of the freight had been offloaded from the plane.

The arrangements for Matthew's return did not sit well with the Holleys, but they were even more disturbed to learn that this sort of handling is standard practice. Honors and ceremonies for deceased service members are rendered later, at the memorial service and funeral. The pre-funeral logistics follow procedures governing the transportation of commercial freight.

In all fairness to the Army, I must note that there *is* an argument to be made for using commercial freight to ship military remains. It's often the quickest means of transportation available, and all branches of the U.S. military

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His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

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go to great effort to return fallen service members to their loved ones as quickly as possible. But for many grieving families, the dispassionate mechanics of the commercial freight process far outweigh the benefits of speedy transportation. John Holley made this unmistakably clear during our very first phone conversation.

“I appreciate the desire to move quickly,” he said. “It’s good to know that people are working so hard to bring Matt home to us as soon as possible. But speed isn’t the only consideration. What if the fastest transportation available was a garbage truck? Would they deliver my son’s remains in *that*?”

John was understandably upset when he asked me that question, and he chose a deliberately-exaggerated illustration to bring home his point. But stripped of emotion and hyperbole, I think his position remains valid. When dealing with families that have been shattered emotionally, speed of service *cannot* be the only driving factor.

John and Stacey Holley are both Army veterans themselves, and they tend to meet challenges head-on. Faced with a situation that compounded their family’s grief, they decided to do something about it. With the assistance of the Casualty Assistance Office assigned to their family, they made contact with California Senator [Barbara Boxer](#), who began making some telephone calls on their behalf. Senator Boxer had no trouble overriding bureaucratic obstacles that might have been insurmountable to the Holley family. John and Stacey were allowed to meet Matthew’s casket on the runway at Lindbergh Field. A small military honor guard joined them in welcoming their son back to American soil. And that was all they’d really wanted — not streaming banners and marching bands, just the opportunity to offer their fallen Soldier some of the respect he had earned.

In the weeks and months after Matt’s funeral, the Holleys worked with Congressman [Duncan Hunter](#), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, to draft legislation governing the return of deceased military personnel to American soil. The resulting bill, “*Transportation of Remains of Casualties Dying in a Theater of Combat Operations*,” has been passed by Congress and as Section 563 of the *Fiscal Year 2007 National Defense Authorization Act*. The language of the bill specifies that the remains of military personnel who die in a theater of combat be transported to the military airfield nearest to the intended place of internment, and that a military escort be present at the arrival airfield to remove the remains from the aircraft and to render proper military honors. The bill also allows next-of-kin to waive this requirement and accept transportation of the remains to the nearest commercial airport without delay.

The current Senate draft of the [2007 National Defense Authorization Act](#) does not contain the language approved by Congress, but several U.S. Senators, including Barbara Boxer, are working hard to convince their fellows to include the language in the final version when the act is signed into law. As I write this, the Senate is in conference, taking this issue (and others) under consideration.

If you’ve read my columns before, you’ll know that — beyond the occasional reminder to look past the flurry of sound bytes and headlines — I don’t usually advise my readers to take political action. Your political views are your business, whether your politics are aligned with mine, or in direct opposition. But in this case, I’m making an exception. The language of this



legislation guarantees proper honors for military remains returning to American soil, while allowing families who don't want such honors to decline them. In essence, it gives the family of each deceased service member the ability to choose in accordance with its beliefs and emotional needs.

The text of Section 563 is available to the public on the Library of Congress website. I'm asking you to read it and think about what it means to our fallen warriors, and to their loved ones. Then pick up the phone, call your senators and urge them to vote in favor of including this provision in the approved version of the *Fiscal Year 2007 National Defense Authorization Act*.

My own interest in this issue was first raised when I interviewed John Holley in January of 2006, just a few weeks after that roadside bomb in Iraq took Matthew Holley's life. My emotional connection was that of an American citizen and a former military man. As a man who spent most of his adult life in uniform, I was frankly angered by the impersonal process currently used to repatriate the remains of our honored dead. As an American, I was shamed by our nation's failure to properly respect the sacrifices of the men and women who have laid down their lives in its defense. But a few days ago, when I met John Holley in person for the first time, I discovered a third emotional connection to this issue: that of a father who has lost a son.

We must have been quite a sight — two grizzled old veterans sitting at a little round table under a shade umbrella in front of a coffee shop, crying their eyes out. I'm sure the other customers were appalled by our little spectacle, but I didn't care and I'm fairly certain that John Holley didn't care either.

Neither of us had counted on turning our meeting into a tear-fest. We had planned to shake hands, drink a little coffee, and catch up on the progress toward what I've come to think of as 'Matthew's Law.' We did some of that, but mostly we talked about our sons. We dragged out photos of Josh and Matt, swapped favorite stories about our sons, and we cried — probably a lot more than middle aged men are supposed to cry.

As I mentioned in the opening sentences of this column, the deaths of Matthew Holley and Joshua Edwards did not have much in common. Their lives, by contrast, were similar enough to give me chills. Matt was a three-time AAU national karate champion, and Josh had a wall full of medals for Kung Fu. They were both gifted amateur artists. They listened to the same music. They watched the same Japanese anime cartoons. Matthew was in the Army. Joshua was Junior Army ROTC, and looking forward to enlisting after high school. And when John and I compared photos, we discovered that our sons looked enough alike to be brothers.

It was this last bit, I think, that caused me to abandon all pretense of courage and break down into tears. Because Matt and Josh *could* have been brothers. I could see myself sitting in John Holley's chair on the opposite side of that coffee shop table. For a few seconds, I could feel the pain of his loss as keenly as I feel the loss of Joshua. And my heart was broken all over again.

This nation can never repay the debt that it owes to John and Stacey Holley, or to the other American families struggling with the loss of their fallen warriors. But we can help these families face the unthinkable with a little more dignity. We can demonstrate our respect and our



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gratitude for their sacrifice by allowing them to welcome their loved ones home in a manner befitting heroes.

It will undoubtedly take more effort to transport our honored dead as heroes, and it will certainly cost more money than the existing commercial freight mechanism. But those expenses are insignificant compared to the price paid by our warriors and their families. And if the most powerful and prosperous nation on earth cannot be troubled to render this small honor to its defenders, then maybe we've forgotten what we were fighting for in the first place.

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