

Price of freedom comes with grief for a serviceman lost  
By Elaine Johnson

The flag was everywhere on the day Marine Sgt. Thomas Gilbert was buried.

It billowed behind the dozens of Patriot Guard motorcycles that led his funeral procession. It fluttered in the hands of onlookers who stood in the cold November wind to pay their respects. It shrouded his casket, a final testament to a young man's courage and patriotism.

The loss of any young life is tragic. More so the young lives—the promise, the hope—lost in war. For these lives were willingly sacrificed in the name of the bedrock American value that still binds this fractured nation: Freedom.

I never met Thomas Gilbert, but I now know of him. I know that he loved the outdoors, hunting and fishing. I know that he affected a truly bad Irish accent. I know that he was a tender son. I know that he was brave.

As a mother, my heart breaks to see his serious young face looking out from the newspaper photos, his Marine uniform immaculate, the flag as his backdrop. He looks much too young to carry the burden of freedom on his shoulders.

Yet, young men—and in recent years, young women—have always carried the burden of this nation's freedom. And many, many of them have fallen. In the Revolutionary War: 4,435. In the Civil War: 185,000. In World War I: 53,500. In World War II: 292,300. In Vietnam: 47,369. In Iraq: 2,826.

On Veterans Day, especially, it is important to recognize that their bravery and sacrifice are undiminished—no matter how much political debate may surround the wars that claimed them. The loss of Thomas Gilbert surely brings this reality home.

To put on a uniform, to take up arms in the name of the United States of America, as Thomas Gilbert did, can't be an easy choice when your contemporaries are settling into jobs, buying cars and enjoying the banquet that is American life. It requires a patriot's heart and a warrior's courage.

Thomas Gilbert had that heart, that courage. He volunteered for a second tour of duty half-way across the world in a place that is increasingly perilous for U.S. troops. As a member of a rapid response unit, he willingly and repeatedly risked his life to save his comrades.

On October 25, enemy fire found him, ending his life, devastating his family, and leaving his townspeople saddened and sober as we consider again the inexorable price of freedom.

As a mother, I abhor war—any war. As a mother, I sincerely grieve for the loss of Thomas Gilbert, Army Pfc. Sean Cardelli, and our other servicemen and women who made the ultimate sacrifice, their lives ended too soon and so far away from home and family. But as a citizen, I can only offer the deepest gratitude and respect for their courage and commitment. Their names will never be forgotten.

I stood under the steel gray sky last week as Thomas Gilbert's coffin was carried to Abraham Lincoln national cemetery. I saw the hearse pause in front of his home, where a flag at half-mast rippled and snapped, as beautiful and indomitable as ever.

I was so moved. And so very proud.

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