

Testimony by Paula Coffman, HB 2507

“Part of me died on the Afghan/Pakistan border. I’m learning to like the person I’ve become.” Those are very tough, heartbreaking words to hear, especially as a parent of a combat veteran. That combat veteran is my son, SrA Derek Scott Martin.

Derek Scott Martin, 32, passed away on Tuesday, March 17, 2020, in Lincoln, California. Derek, my middle child, and only son, was born in Wellington, Kansas on July 16, 1987. He is a graduate of Wellington High School, class of 2005. Derek excelled at academics, technology, and sports, to include baseball, basketball, and his passion - golf. He was on the golf team, all through high school, and enjoyed working at the golf course.

As a child, Derek was very silly, ornery, energetic, and extremely outgoing; he would make friends on vacation that may be decades older than him. He will be remembered by childhood friends as “D-Money,” the guy who loved playing poker and had an infectious laugh.

The horrific events that took place on 9-11-2001 happened when Derek was 14 years old. I remember seeing him being completely consumed by the ongoing news coverage, during this time, was when he said he was going to join the military. I can proudly say he stuck with that decision. Derek enlisted in the United States Air Force in 2006. Upon graduating from Basic Military Training at Lackland AFB, Texas, he was assigned to MacDill AFB, Florida as part of the 6th Security Forces Squadron. He proudly served in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom, deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan multiple times. Derek was happiest being with his military brothers and sisters. He was a decorated war veteran and recipient of the prestigious Purple Heart.

Camp Bucca, Iraq was Derek’s first Middle East assignment as a prison guard, doing patrols (2007-2008), that was a big adjustment for a 20-year-old ‘kid’ from the Midwest. What was once known as Camp Bucca, it housed numerous prominent Islamic extremists, up to 20,000 Iraqi inmates. Derek was also deployed as a M249 Machine Gunner, and alternate sniper.

Bagram Airfield, Kandahar, Afghanistan was Derek’s next assignment (2008-2009) This deployment was to my knowledge his worst, most dangerous, and caused most of his PTSD. Derek and 4 others in his unit were dispatched to a disturbance involving a suicide bomber. Enroute their vehicle hit an IED, and literally exploded, killing 3 of the 5. Derek was always the driver, but for whatever reason that day, he wasn’t, and was seated directly behind the driver. The driver, the gunner, and one other were killed. This traumatic event caused Derek a TBI, survivor’s guilt, (that stuck with him until the day he died) severe anxiety, depression, and a shrapnel scar on his left arm as a permanent and constant reminder. The loss of his close comrades was devastating, and greatly affected him in every aspect. Also, while serving in Operation Enduring Freedom, his unit (maybe 6-8) was sent on a mission into the Afghanistan/Pakistan mountains. This mission was supposed to be brief, they only had enough ammunition, food/water for several days. However, the situation quickly escalated, preventing the helicopter from picking them up as planned. The Taliban/Isis was quickly on the tail of Derek and his comrades, and they were running out of ammo & supplies. Jason, one of the troops, was critically injured, and literally carried along. I knew nothing at all about this awful incident, until several years after Derek’s enlistment ended. I was visiting him and his family in California. He wanted me to watch the movie, “Lone Survivor” with him, not far into the movie, I understood why. Several times throughout the movie, Derek paused it, and told me just how similar what happened in “Operation Redwing” was what his squadron endured in these same mountains. Absolutely traumatic! Derek’s exact words

to me at the end of the movie, "Part of me died on the Afghan/Pakistan border. I'm learning to like the person I've become." I knew he was right; he was a different person. In reality part of Derek was KIA, more than once. I asked Derek why he didn't tell us about the terrible things that happened while serving in Afghanistan, his reply was, "because I knew I was going to volunteer to deploy again". Even though Derek was clearly nowhere near ready to deploy again, he deployed a third time, again back to Iraq.

Renee (Derek's wife) mentioned the recurring nightmares he often had while on that mountain. He'd have horrible flashbacks, talking to Jason, (who was badly injured) trying to calm and keep him quiet from crying out in pain, telling him the enemies were close behind them. Derek's PTSD, anxiety, and survivor guilt only continued to worsen over time. As a civilian he was diagnosed with sleep apnea, again, that only worsened his overall mental health.

Camp Stryker, Iraq, 2010. Derek's third and final deployment. The mission, help train the Iraqi police, teaching them to secure bomb sites, and clear buildings.

In 2012 Derek was honorably discharged, after serving 6 years in the Air Force. Soon after, he enrolled in Professional Golfers Career College, Orlando, FL specializing in an associate degree in pro golf management, a dream he had long aspired to accomplish. Derek graduated amongst the top of his class in 2013, holds the course record with a 59, and had qualified for numerous tournaments. Derek worked hard as an assistant golf professional while living in Florida, and also at several golf courses in California. Additionally, Derek was in his final semester of school; he would have graduated in the spring of 2020 with his bachelor's degree in business administration. Due to Derek's love for the military and helping others, he partnered with the Wounded Warrior Project and spent a great deal of time talking about his military experiences with local veterans, hoping that sharing his stories would help others. Derek always believed there were others that needed help more than himself. In conjunction with one of his Air Force brothers, who like Derek suffered from PTSD, he co-founded the nonprofit, Rimpact Foundation, in 2014. Rimpact stood for "Reaper Impact", partly named after the namesake of the Security Force moniker, the Reaper. Derek always believed sports, especially golf, was a way to ease the pain people felt, especially those with PTSD and TBI ailments. Rimpact's mission was to bring wounded warriors together around the game of golf, and Derek was key in acquiring donations for equipment rounds of golf, and lessons. Derek got such joy volunteering his time to teach golf lessons outside of the organization and work, as well as being a regular volunteer at his children's elementary school. Derek was an avid Kansas City Chiefs fan, and a loyal fan to his favorite band, Metallica. He enjoyed running, having a good beer, being in the snow, cooking, playing video games, talking to people, and being silly with his kids. Derek coached his son's youth football, basketball, and baseball teams. The kids loved Derek's silliness and sense of humor. Derek truly was a big kid at heart and enjoyed being home with his wife and two kids. Derek's oldest son is a senior at Wellington High school, and will graduate with the class of 2024.

On behalf of Derek's family, we thank you for reading about his life. A life well lived. Although, it was cut short, he accomplished more in his 32 years than most do in a lifetime. Derek truly lived life to the fullest, and was such a bright light in this world, and is so loved & terribly missed by many. This bridge dedication in his memory, means more to us than you can imagine. The bridge we chose has special meaning, he drove over it often, it's in Derek's hometown, and close to the golf course where he spent so much of his time over the years. Please pass this bill into a law, so this bridge dedication can happen. Sincerely, and with warmest regards,

Paula Coffman, Derek's Mom