

Memory of Soldier swims with fish

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5/13/2011 - **JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq** -- Seemingly lost, he turns to steal a glance at a friend, only to reveal his sad puffy eyes and down-turned lips.

From behind the glass, the two appear to loaf in a sea of sorrow, as if carrying the memory of a lost brother.

Nearly three years old, these fish occupy a small corner off to the side in the contingency aeromedical staging facility's waiting hall. Affectionately named Pitbull and Little Man, these fish and the tank were donated by family members to honor the memory of a fallen soldier.

On April 9, 2008, Army Sergeant Jesse A. Ault, a motor transport operator assigned to E- Company, 429th Brigade Support Battalion, Virginia Army National Guard, was performing convoy operations on the outskirts of Baghdad when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device. The 28 year-old died from his wounds.

As U.S. Forces start their transition out of Iraq, 332nd Expeditionary Medical Group staff members are working to reunite these fish with Sergeant Ault's wife, Betsy Ault; stepson Nathan 13; son Adam, 4, and daughter Rachel, 3, in Virginia.

Staff Sgts. Brandon Smith and Joanna Boyd, 332nd Expeditionary Medical Group CASF members, knew that rotations of Air National Guard members have cared for Pitbull and Little Man since 2008. The duo dug deeper in hopes to locate a next of kin.

Sergeant Boyd, who deployed from Grissom Air Reserve Base, Ind., is the unofficial fish caretaker for this rotation and originally planned to fly these fish to CASF in Landstuhl Germany.

Patriot Guard

What started as a straight to the point e-mail, opened up a floodgate of tears and emotions that impacted the Ault family.

"My rotation has been left to care for the fish...My questions is this, are these fish of any importance to you and your kids? If you are interested, I will have them brought to your family...I look forward to hearing from you," Sergeant Smith wrote in an e-mail to Betsy.

Sergeant Smith, who is deployed from Hill Air Force Base, Utah, is a Patriot Guard Riders ride captain and has made it his personal mission to get the fish back to the states, if possible. The sergeant feels its the least he could do for a Soldier who died for our freedom.

"I spend a lot of my free time in support of my fallen brothers and sisters and it would be my honor to see this out..." Sergeant Smith, a native of Roy, Utah said.

The main mission of Patriot Guard Riders is to attend the funeral services of fallen American heroes as invited guests of the family. They have more than 200,000 members worldwide.



JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq--U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Abraham Agiba, 332nd Expeditionary Medical Group medical technician, takes a moment to observe the fish May 12, 2011. The United Pet Group Tetra (PETA) donated the fish to the Contingency Airlift Staging Facility in honor of U.S. Army Sergeant Jesse A. Ault. Sergeant Ault was killed in action April 9, 2008. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Keyonna Fennell)

The Beginning

An amazing twist of events unfolded through e-mail conversations between Betsy and Sergeant Smith revealed the Ault's have a deeper connection to Iraq.

Betsy, previously an Army staff sergeant said she and Jesse met in 2003 when their units were combined for a deployment. The two grew close and fell in love while training to deploy to Logistics Support Area Anaconda, now JBB, during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I was soooo [sic] not looking for a relationship, but dang him; I just couldn't get rid of his sorry butt," Betsy said in an e-mail interview. "He took me home to meet his momma during our last pass before we deployed. He told her I was the one, IF [sic] we both made it back."

The Aults tied the knot after making it back safely and conceived their first son together that same year. When Adam was only three months old and Betsy had one month of maternity leave remaining, she got the call that her unit would soon be deploying.

While Jesse had already separated and was convinced they could lead a "normal life," Betsy had two more years of enlisted service.

"He being the man he was, re-enlisted into my unit and volunteered to go," she said. "So, I stayed home with our infant son and he took my place, literally."

The day Sergeant Ault landed in Kuwait in 2007, he found out they were expecting another baby. He took emergency leave in January 2008 to witness the birth of baby Rachel.

He returned to Iraq and, like in a scene from a movie where the hero goes to war and is killed right before coming home, Sergeant Ault was hit by an IED when his company was on its last convoy mission.

"He loved and boy did he live. He was an amazing man who was loyal, dedicated and put his FAMILY [sic] first, then his country," she said of her husband. "To say I lost everything is an understatement."

Born Feb. 18, 1980, in Wheeling, W.Va., Jesse grew up in Middlebourne and graduated from Tyler Consolidated High School.

He and his best friend Travis Russell joined the U.S. Army before they graduated from high school. Inseparable, the two completed basic and advanced training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and Airborne training at Fort Benning, Ga. The two friends also served four years on active duty before moving to Virginia to join the Army National Guard, in which Jesse served another six years. During his 10 years in the Army, Sergeant Ault served two tours in Iraq.

Sergeant Ault was posthumously promoted to the rank of staff sergeant, awarded the Bronze Star Medal, the Purple Heart and the Combat Action Badge on top of the many decorations and awards earned throughout his military career.

Pitbull and Little Man

In 2008, Air National Guard members at the Air Force Theater Hospital contacted the United Pet Group Tetra to see if it was possible to get a fish tank setup. In a twist of fate, Betsy's step-mom, Rena, was the one who received the emailed request. She is in charge of promotional offers, such as charitable events, for the company.

"For my step-mom to get the request right after we lost Jesse...wow," Betsy described in the e-mail. "Her only stipulation was that they dedicate it in Jesse's memory."

The fish were a way for Betsy and her family to give something back to Soldiers stationed where the couple 'swore' they belonged.

"It was a way for my step-mom and I to feel like we were doing something in his memory, quite silly yet very meaningful," she said.

Each rotation, CASF members -- who include active duty, guard and reserve members -- have taken turns to caring for the fish. Members on this rotation even purchased replacement parts for the tank with their own

money to ensure the fish stay healthy.

Peace and Serenity

The hospital's longest residents, Pitbull and Little Man have witnessed the destruction and evil face of war as countless hundreds of wounded warriors were wheeled past their tank. But these fish bring about a different aura for patients and staff members as well.

CASF member Tech. Sgt. Terrance Guidry noticed the fish tank in the corner but was either in a rush to get spun up or was too busy training new personnel to check them out.

One day Sergeant Guidry sat down to watch the fish swim and noticed how much more relaxed he was afterward.

"That is how I get a quick dose of resiliency around here," Sergeant Guidry, who is deployed from Altus Air Force Base, Okla., said.

It wasn't until Sergeant Smith proposed sending Pitbull and Little Man back to the Ault family that Sergeant Guidry discovered the history.

"I read the story and it hit me close to my heart. I sat there and thought about his family and how much they have lost," the Beaumont, Texas native, said. "Sergeant Ault paid the ultimate sacrifice and it's unfortunate that all of our wounded warriors do not make it home to their families...Now those fish truly have a deeper meaning to me."

Operation Homecoming

For Betsy and her family, the fish and tank symbolizes a lot.

"They mean so much to us. Balad was where we got our start. It was 'home' to Jesse and me," Betsy said. "I did call my step-mom and let her know they were still there and it made her cry in a sentimental good way."

Having learned Sergeant Ault's story and the history of these fish, CASF members are hopeful and working every angle they can think of to see these fish survive the long trip to Virginia.

Sergeant Smith said he and CASF members would hate to see this legacy end just because their rotation will be leaving soon.

He sought help from the 332nd EMDG superintendent, who commissioned Sergeant Smith to locate a small tank and a battery-operated aerator to keep the fish alive during transport.

While the sergeant has contacted fellow Patriot Guard Riders in Virginia to pickup and escort the fish directly to the Ault home, he may have run into some temporary roadblocks.

"I ABSOLUTELY [sic] think it's possible to get these fish home," Sergeant Smith. "The only holdup is getting a customs clearance."

While these fish were placed there to boost the morale of wounded warriors and others who have come through the CASF, Sergeant Smith believes their purpose is near complete.

"In essence, these fish have been deployed here for three years," he said. "They have done a great job, but the war is ending and it is time for them to go home."

In the event CASF members cannot get a clearance from U.S. Customs, they will carry the fish to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany, so Pitbull and Little Man can comfort wounded warriors there.