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SCENE AND HEARD

A Heroic Death, Without the Headlines

Marine Capt. Matthew Freeman made his last trip across the U.S. Naval Academy in the company of friends the other day.

Yes, there were admirals and generals, colonels and majors, captains of the Navy and the Marines among the hundreds who joined him. But there are moments when the strictures of rank are loosened by the greater bond of brotherhood. This was one of them.

Four thousand and seventy-four days had passed since Matt arrived here as a kid, had his head shaved and was sworn in as a Navy midshipman. Two thousand six hundred and fifty-one days had gone by since he hurled his hat into the air at graduation and became a Marine. It had been 47 days since he married Theresa, his high school sweetheart, and 34 days since he headed to Afghanistan.

And it was just 19 days after he led his men onto a rooftop that provided the only high ground in a nasty firefight with the Taliban in a hamlet in a rugged, desolate northeastern province.

The morning he came back to the Naval Academy was a Wednesday, but it will stick in your memory as the day you heard that Ted Kennedy had died and the week when you learned that someone might have killed Michael Jackson. The politician and the entertainer of their generations, they were lionized

by many and scorned by some. One pleaded guilty, the other was found innocent. But they each died with an indelible asterisk, a footnote to their legacies that time will not erase.

Matt Freeman died clean.

His life and death played out that sunny morning in the chapel at the Academy and as the long cortege made its way on foot across the Yard to what would be his final resting place. The words they found for him were devoted to his Maker, loyalty beyond what most men possess and grim courage in the end. Marine sentries in dress blue snapped into salute as he passed. There was a band. Flags flew.

Nine days earlier, when his body came home to a small town in Georgia, three creeks south of Savannah, people lined the route, waving paper flags. Children drew signs of tribute on cardboard. Mothers cried. You can find it all on the Internet, of course. All that, and a lot more about how he lived and how he died. You will discover, most of all, why people loved him.

It is the business of generals to calibrate the magnitude of a man's courage. They are not to be envied the task, and many of them learned its measure by testing their own guts on the battlefield.

Theresa rose from her pew in the chapel to accept Matt's Bronze Star, the fifth in the hierarchy of combat medals awarded Marines. He died on a

mission for which he volunteered, in a province far from home, leading men into battle. Pinned down and receiving a "heavy volume" of enemy fire, the medal citation says, he rose up and led his men into a mud-brick house, cleared it of the enemy, "was the first to reach the rooftop" where he "spotted an enemy rocket-propelled grenade gunman and immediately killed him . . . and began to engage while under fire."

His best friend told the mourners, "He would want you to know that he went down swinging."

There were a dozen Marine captains in dress blue in the overflowing pews of the chapel. Marines may blink hard a few times, but they don't cry. Their mothers and widowed spouses cry for them.

In the week when they laid a young Marine captain to rest, the news was dominated by the death of a politician and the echo from an entertainer's death. The flag-draped coffin on the front page was not his, but if you look carefully in the paper this week you will see a small picture of Matt Freeman among the faces of those who have fallen recently in battle.

He did not live long enough to become an the icon of Kennedy or Jackson, but he died the greater hero.

— Ashley Halsey III,
staff writer