

WASHINGTON (May 5) - The following tribute to Marine Lance Corporal Thomas Rivers Jr. of Hoover will be kept on Congressman Bachus' website. Lance Cpl. Rivers was killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan on April 28, 2010.

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Iron Man

Tom Sileo | May 05, 2010

As Lance Cpl. Thomas Rivers Jr. patrolled Afghanistan's volatile Helmand province, he knew God had his back. The Marine often carried a Bible, yet even on days when he only had room for essential combat gear, Rivers felt protected by Psalm 91:1, which was tattooed on his back.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

Faith guided Lance Cpl. Rivers from youth into manhood. In an essay the future Marine handed into his ninth grade teacher on November 12, 2003, Rivers explained why he had been yearning to serve his country since age ten.

"I think if I put my mind to it, and with God's help, I could make it in the Marines," Rivers wrote. "I believe that joining the Marines would be a good experience for me because it will teach me

to rely on God to make it through."

For Rivers, joining the Marine Corps would not be as simple as signing a piece of paper. The Marine's father, Dr. Thomas Rivers Sr., told [The Unknown Soldiers](#) that dyslexia made classroom work very difficult for his son, who also faced some early physical limitations that made success in sports equally elusive.

"He was my hero before he joined the Marines," Dr. Rivers said. "He overcame so many obstacles to transform from a thin child into a ripped warrior."

Dr. Rivers credits the Marines for giving his son extra motivation to hit the books, as well as the gym, with an unbreakable vigor.

"He was the iron man," Dr. Rivers said with pride. "He struggled in high school until one of the Marine recruiters told him he needed a diploma to enlist. We never heard a word about low grades after that."

While basic training and deployments change almost everyone, Rivers stuck to his strong values in the unforgiving humidity of South Carolina's Parris Island and raw desert heat of the new Iraq. He returned from his first overseas tour in February 2009 to his proud parents, friends, and relatives in Birmingham, Alabama. During his Iraq deployment, the Marine's loving mother, Charon, often whispered her son's favorite Psalm verse during frequent prayers for his safety.

Word soon came that Lance Cpl. Rivers and the 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, II Marine Expeditionary Force were needed in Afghanistan. The young Marine, now 22, already had a combat tour under his belt and prepared for another deployment with the same focus, faith, and strength that guided him through Iraq. Both of his grandfathers had served in the military, and protecting America in the years following the 9/11 attacks was a duty Rivers believed fell to him.

"He was never a conformist," Dr. Rivers explained. "Thomas always knew he was a warrior."

During a six-week period in Afghanistan, Rivers had started a Bible study with one of his best friends, Lance Cpl. Matthew Proctor. With weapons in their laps but their Bibles open, the Marines would search for answers on how people could love one another, even in the war-ravaged mountains of the war on terror's central front. Before a recent mission that Rivers volunteered for after a fellow Marine suffered severe exhaustion, he prayed with Proctor before leaving together on patrol.

According to the Pentagon, Lance Cpl. Rivers was killed on April 28 in Afghanistan's Helmand province. Three military messengers arrived at the Rivers household in Birmingham just hours later to deliver the solemn news, and his devastated parents, who are still "numb," according to Dr. Rivers, hoped to get more details on their son's final moments. As friends, family, fellow churchgoers, and the Birmingham community sprung into action to support Dr. and Mrs. Rivers, a phone call came from Afghanistan from someone also in deep mourning. It was Lance Cpl. Proctor.

"He told us that after Thomas stepped on the IED, three of his best friends in the Marine Corps, including Matthew, kneeled down beside him," Dr. Rivers recounted the day after receiving the phone call. "Matthew held his hand, and they said the Bible verse tattooed on Thomas' back."

After the grieving father thanked Lance Cpl. Matthew Proctor and his family for their selfless service and extraordinary support, Dr. Rivers said something, through a father's tears, that moved me deeply.

"It is comforting to know that Thomas was with three people who loved him when he died."

In the final hours before Lance Cpl. Rivers deployed to Afghanistan, he also held hands with his mom and prayed. Six weeks later and half a world away, he would hold hands and pray with three beloved fellow volunteer warriors in his last moments on earth. Today, perhaps the brave Marine is holding hands with both of his grandfathers, praying for the loving family and grieving nation he left behind.

Lance Cpl. Thomas Rivers Jr. stood for overcoming obstacles, finding common ground, and

offering love, even amid uncertainty and violence. To truly honor his sacrifice, we can learn from how he lived.

About Tom Sileo

Tom Sileo is an award-winning blogger and journalist who worked in newsrooms for more than eight years. He was most recently a copy editor for CNN.com Live where he helped launch the first-of-its-kind, anchored broadband news service in December 2005. Before joining CNN in Atlanta, he was a producer for Tribune Broadcasting in Washington, WSPA-TV in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and WTVM-TV in Columbus, Georgia. He has also worked at the Associated Press and interned at WRC-TV in Washington, near his hometown of Vienna, Virginia. Sileo has a B.A. in Journalism and Mass Media from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.