

Touching Hearts in both Life and Death: Brett Lee Lundstrom

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Abstract

The following article is a product of the Veteran's Legacy Program, a collaboration between the Veteran's Association and undergraduate history departments. Undergraduate history students at the University of Denver began writing biographies about the veterans buried at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado.

A marine from South Dakota, Brett Lee Lundstrom touched many people throughout his lifetime. He was a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe. He served in both Afghanistan and Iraq but spent the majority of his service fighting for Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was killed in Iraq after a sniper opened fire unexpectedly on his company. He was just 22 years old when he died.

Brett Lee Lundstrom was born in Vermillion, South Dakota on June 12, 1983 to his father, Ed Lundstrom, and mother, Doyla Carol (Underbaggage) Lundstrom¹. His parents were attending the University of South Dakota at the time of his birth². The couple later had a second son named Ed Lundstrom. Both Brett's mother and father were of American Indian descent. His mother, Doyla Lundstrom was from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the southwestern part of South Dakota³. His father was from St. Francis, part of the Rosebud Indian Reservation to the east of the Pine Ridge Reservation³. At his birth, Brett became an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in South Dakota³.

When Brett was two years old, his father graduated from college and went into active duty in the Marine Corps. As a result, Brett and his brother "grew up in the marine corps," as their mother explained². Due to his father's service, the Brett Lundstrom and his family moved around a lot as Brett was growing up⁴. Brett attended many different schools throughout his childhood. His high school years were spent in Virginia. He attended Woodbridge High School in Woodbridge Virginia when he was a freshman². The family later moved to Stafford, Virginia, where Brett attended Brooke Point High School². During his time there, he ran on the track team and was a part of the Business Leaders of America⁵. He loved going to sporting events with friends, especially when it was to see his favorite hockey team,

the Washington Capitals³. He also loved to read as he was growing up². Brett graduated in June of 2001².

In the fall, Brett began college at the County College of Morris in Morris, New Jersey². It was there that he joined a Platoon Leaders Class, offered through the Marine Corps. It was because of this class that Brett would be able to graduate college and enter into the Marine Corps as an officer, like his father had done². The Marine Corps Platoon Leaders Course (PLC) was similar to the Reserves Officers Training Corps (ROTC), but geared specifically toward marines. The PLC is a rigorous program in which students are trained in military tasks and tested for their ability to handle the physically demanding work of being a marine⁶.

While Brett was a freshman in the program, the family was stationed about thirty-five miles west of New York City, when the Twin Towers went down in the September 11th terrorist attacks. Brett's mom, Doyla, explained that after the towers went down, Brett started trying to convince her to let him enlist in the marine corps right away². Doyla, not ready for her son to enter into the marines just yet, said she was able to talk him out of it for about three more semesters but, "he was adamant that he wanted to join the Marine Corps."²

In January of 2003, when the family moved back to the home they had built in Stafford, Brett enlisted in the Marine Corps. Both the 9/11 attacks and his father's commitment to the marines motivated Brett in this decision². Joining the marines was always part of Brett's plan. Doyla said that Brett and his younger brother would often play marines as children, remembering that they would dress up in their dads' uniform and pretend to be in the military². Their mom explained that she knew they would both eventually join the military, and she was ultimately really proud of Brett when he did². The tradition of military service runs deep in the

Lundstrom family. Brett's maternal grandfather, and all of his brothers, served in Korea. Brett's father, Ed Lundstrom, was a career marine, meaning that he served in the marines throughout his life, and up until retirement⁴. At least twenty years is needed in the armed forces before one can retire⁴. Brett's brother enlisted in the army after high school as well, following in the family footsteps.

Brett was assigned to Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, II Marine Expeditionary Force, Camp Lejeune, N.C. He completed Boot Camp training in Parris Island, South Carolina. His company first spent some time in Afghanistan. They were later sent to Iraq where Brett spent the majority of his service, fighting for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Operation Iraqi Freedom began on March 20, 2003 with airstrikes on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's Presidential Palace. The Operation was authorized when Hussein was found to be in breach of the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1441 which prohibited the stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction². The United States forces, combined with troops from Great Britain, invaded Iraq and quickly defeated Iraqi forces⁷. Baghdad fell only five weeks after the invasion began⁸. Afterwards, an insurgency of al Qaeda-inspired fighters poured into Iraq and enacted guerilla warfare tactics against US troops and a civil war within Iraq. This marked the second phase of the war, in which a U.S. occupation of Iraq was opposed by this insurgency.



Figure 1. Brett Lee Lundstrom⁹

Brett made a lot of friends in the Marines, and his mom remembered that he really enjoyed that part of serving. The company also spent some time stationed in Okinawa, Japan, which Brett enjoyed². Brett's military occupation code, or MOS, was infantry². Brett's specific job as an infantryman was to carry what is known as the "SAW." This is the squad automatic weapon, a large automatic weapon that weighs 18 pounds¹⁰. His mom said that carrying the bulky SAW was Brett's least favorite part of serving². Brett called his mom as often as he could while he was overseas².

In Iraq, Brett's company was stationed in a town called Fallujah. The company was there to patrol the streets. On January 7, 2006, Brett was bringing up the rear of his platoon, carrying the SAW, when a sniper opened fire on him and his company². Brett was killed in the attack along with two other men, Lance Cpl. Jerriard P. Jacobs and Lance Cpl. Kyle W. Brown¹¹. Brett

had served three years, and was due to come home in April of 2006, with only a year of service to go.

During his time in the service, he was awarded with a purple heart, two Navy Achievement Medals, an Iraq Campaign Medal, an Afghanistan Campaign Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal and the National Defense Medal¹². Brett had achieved the rank of corporal.

The mark Brett left, and the amount of people he touched in his life, is clear. In 2015, a support group for military families donated a ten-passenger van to the Oglala Sioux tribe in Brett's name¹³. The van helped veterans living on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota with transportation to events and appointments. The Brett Lundstrom Scholarship for the Performing Arts was also created in his honor by a theatre teacher at his old high school who was one of the Lundstrom's family friends. She produces a play in his memory every year and all of the proceeds go towards the scholarship¹⁴. In 2016, 19 students had received scholarships in Lundstrom's name, each worth up to \$800. In Kyle, South Dakota at the Lakota Prairie Ranch Resort, a conference room was named the Brett Lundstrom Room, where a large plaque is kept, honoring Brett's legacy. Brett is remembered in his obituary as "charismatic, with a kind and generous soul; always humorous with a smile that lit up any room or place he entered."⁴ Brett's mom admires his dedication to his country. She said he was always very outgoing, and made friends with everyone, remembering that he

"was just a really good kid." He was honest, loyal, and "loved his mama."² Brett was buried at Fort Logan National Cemetery after a traditional two-night Native American wake on his mother's home reservation in South Dakota, where the family visited often while Brett was growing up. Doyla remembered that every time the family went back to visit, Brett and his brother "were like little celebrities." This love for Brett and the Lundstrom family was evident at his wake where the community gathered to celebrate his life. Brett then had a Catholic funeral in Denver, where he had a lot of family ties and had planned on living after his service². From family visits to Denver while growing up, Brett came to really enjoy the city, and his mom thought it felt right that he be buried at Fort Logan. Brett's bravery and sacrifice for his country, and the impact he had on the lives of his friends and families,



Figure 2. Brett Lee Lundstrom¹⁵

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will forever be honored. Doyla remembers her son lovingly, saying, "He was my angel... he was my real-life angel."²

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