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The day Alex was killed

BY ROY WENZL
The Wichita Eagle

The facts about the life and death of Alex Funcheon are these: As a Wichita teen he was a screw-up and a jerk. He got drunk, got high, got arrested for possession, dropped out, bedded girls and bragged about it, cursed at his parents, bullied his little sister to tears, and ticked off friends so much that a roommate, one of his closest friends, told Alex one day to find some other place to live.

He told his Christian parents that he doubted the existence of God.

His father, Bob Funcheon, in despair, urged his son to join the U.S. Army. Alex enlisted.

On April 29, 2007, Sgt. Alex Funcheon, age 21, was killed by a roadside bomb in Baghdad.

At the funeral in Wichita, family and friends were startled to discover, from notes sent by soldiers, that Alex had become a good soldier, resourceful, courageous -- and beloved.

Six weeks after Alex died, the president of the United States came to Wichita to dedicate a new youth center and to crack jokes at a political fundraiser. The moment he heard Bush was coming, Bob said, "I knew I wanted to do something big. For Alex."

The Funcheons asked for a meeting.

On Air Force One in Wichita, on June 15 last year, they confronted an exhausted-looking President Bush with a message.

A lot of sons and daughters died, they told the president.

They asked whether their son died for nothing.

APRIL 29, 2007

Forward Operating Base, Baghdad, Iraq
Truck convoy, 1st Scout Platoon of Alpha Troop, 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalryregiment

In east Baghdad, Sgt. Gerardo Medrano and the 20 other guys from Alpha Troop's 1st Platoon could feel the heat from the morning sun as they strapped on body armor. They were laughing, joking, and a good deal scared.

They were about to drive down a road.

In the pouches attached to the front of their armored vests, they slipped in one ammunition magazine after another, 30 bullets to a magazine, seven or more magazines stuck into the chest pouches of each soldier. They cross-checked each other's pouches to make sure everybody had what they needed: bullets, night vision devices, water, medical kits.

In the turret of the convoy's lead Humvee, Alex Funcheon, a kid from Wichita and the lead gunner of this scout platoon, was checking the action on the 50-caliber machine gun and big thermal sights that were mounted in the gun turret.

He and the platoon in a few minutes would drive out the gate of Rustamiyah, the forward operating base that used to be the Iraqi military academy and was now a fortress home to battalions from the U.S. Army's 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division.

Lt. Jon Bland, when he walked up to his platoon, saw body armor, machine guns and short-barreled M4 carbines strewn over the hoods of the four Humvees parked single file. Soldiers were loading food coolers onto a trailer hitched at the back of one Humvee.

Bland heard Staff Sgt. Jay Martin, a political conservative, teasing a liberal-leaning Army specialist named Cooley. "The trouble with Democrats is..." Martin began. Cooley walked away. "Hey," Martin called out. "Where's Cooley?"

Bland grinned. Martin was trying to break the tension.

Bullets, armor, grenades.

If they got into a firefight, they would quickly shred any insurgent group that stood and fought. But a fight wasn't the worry. They'd been shot at so many times that no one worried about it anymore, and the insurgents never stood and fought. They hit and ran instead, and then melted back into the local population. And they planted roadside bombs.

Commanders in combat don't mess around about whom they promote, and Funcheon had become a sergeant at 21 by showing diligence and drive. At home, his parents and sister remembered him as a sweet kid who'd turned mean in ninth grade and smoked pot. But Alex had e-mailed a friend recently: "i've been clean for a long time and im not gonna go back."

Last night, when other kid soldiers rested or played video games, Funcheon lifted weights for an hour in the gym, with Bland watching. Bland had heard stories. Funcheon had a fondness for high-octane alcohol, had recently coaxed his girlfriend back at Fort Carson, Colo., to mail-smuggle him water bottles full of Absolut. But Funcheon had six-pack abs and 180 pounds of bone and muscle packed on a fat-free, 5-foot-9-inch frame. The kid could carry 40 pounds of armor all day in heat well above 100. He could fight.

They were heading out to hunt bad guys in a block-by-block strategy. Generals called it the Surge. Bland called it misery.

"It was like that old movie, 'Groundhog Day,' " he said later. "Every day on patrol, we repeat the same miserable day over and over and over. Every day, hunting bad guys, every day trying to question Iraqis, knowing the Iraqis could get assassinated later for talking to us, every day knowing that some of the Iraqi police we were bunking with were probably calling insurgents on their cell phones to rat us out every time we went out the gate."

They'd served in combat since October, six months. Funcheon was so stressed that he'd e-mailed girlfriend Jasmine Neumann that his close-cut blond hair was falling out in clumps. He'd stuck his head in front of a webcam to show her.

They'd come to defend America and free the Iraqis, but ended up appalled by the hatred and treachery they saw every day. "This place is corrupt, u have no idea," Funcheon had e-mailed his parents in December. "Can't tell the goodguys from the badguys sometimes." In November, he'd written his Mom to send him a slingshot to even things with Iraqi children who shot stones at him. When his parents suggested they send soccer balls for Iraqi children, Alex replied with obscenities. "No gifts for them unless we're getting rid of trash." He marveled at people dumping trash and sewage into Baghdad streets.

Alex and many fellow warriors were still near-children, like Brian Botello, an Iowan who at 19 was still two years short of the U.S. drinking age. But they were like brothers now, too. The boys of 1st Platoon told each other about their hopes, their pasts, their girlfriends. Funcheon cracked them up; he put on a billed Playboy cap one day, when Bland raised his camera to take a picture. In another photo, Funcheon pretended to be a smashed bug, smooshing nose and lips into the ballistic glass of the Humvee's gun turret. He told tale after tale about the drinking binges and dating rituals of Wichita.

But today Funcheon was silent and tense. He rechecked his gun. He made sure Pvt. Botello, the driver, had checked the Humvee radio and had good radio contact with the other Humvees.

They all felt stomach flutters about the drive.

The mission would be to drive from heavily fortified Rustamiyah to central Baghdad, to what the Army called a Joint Security Station, an Iraqi police station just outside the streets leading into Sadr City, Baghdad's most dangerous suburb.

They would bunk for a week with another platoon and in that time would do 10 or 12 foot patrols, two a day. The strategy was to hunt block by block.

The Iraqis with whom they bunked were supposed to patrol with them, but nearly always went looking for excuses instead of rifles when the time came. Bland, Funcheon and the others wondered whether any Iraqis wanted to salvage Iraq from murder and treachery. Some did want this, and were murdered for working with Americans. But most seemed apathetic -- or traitorous.

The trip ahead would last 20 minutes. Funcheon, the lead pair of eyes, was the guy expected to keep them alive by looking for bombs camouflaged along the roadway. Some insurgents had become so good that they would tear up a street curb, plant a bomb, then camouflage it with a fake curb painted to look real.

Bland called 1st Platoon together.

He told them their route, told them to watch the ditches.

Medrano, Funcheon and Martin climbed into the lead Humvee, along with Botello, and an Iraqi interpreter with a tongue-twisting name. 1st Platoon had just met him; he told them to call him "Murphy."

Bland rode in the passenger front seat of the second Humvee. He plugged his iPod into his sound system, and turned on Nine Inch Nails' new album, "Year Zero."

They rolled out the gate.

Bland, riding behind Funcheon's lead Humvee, could see Funcheon's head swiveling right and left as he peered over 4-inch armor plates.

Bland was proud. His little scout platoon had the highest rate of bombs spotted and insurgents captured in their entire squadron. "Every soldier in my platoon had fired weapons in firefights," he said later.

Every soldier in it had laughed at Funcheon's stories of compliant girls and alcoholic confusion. But there was a reason they stuck him up front.

In an armored cavalry scout platoon, when you risk running into roadside bombs, you pick the best gunner with the best pair of eyes and put him in the gun turret of the lead Humvee.

Back home, Alex's family and friends thought of him as a screw-up. But here, under a ruthless sun, 20 combat soldiers trusted Sgt. Alexander Funcheon with their lives.

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Sgt. Medrano sat in the rear seat, on the right side, his M4 carbine between his knees. Funcheon sat in the gunner's elevated strap chair, his hips swaying in the straps only inches from Medrano's helmeted head. At the wheel, Botello drove, 20 to 30 mph, dodging potholes, scooting the convoy around slow traffic. Beside Botello, Martin, the conservative sergeant, at 29 an old man among kids, peered at a map, calling directions: "Scoot left now. Go this way. Go that way."

They came upon stalled traffic; someone had piled rocks in the road near an Iraqi police checkpoint.

Botello slowed.

"Go around to the left," Martin said.

Botello gunned the engine, drove onto the highway shoulder; Medrano saw dirt, sand, bushes and suddenly, a blast and a burst of light.

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In the second Humvee, Bland saw Funcheon and the lead Humvee disappear in a giant ball of flame and dust. The blast rocked Bland's Humvee. When he regained vision, Bland watched Funcheon's Humvee roll out of control.

Bland, reeling from the explosion's concussion, jumped out of his Humvee with his M4 and raced forward.

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Medrano screamed and screamed and screamed. The blast had hit from the left, six metal tubes, each about a foot long, eight inches in diameter, Iranian designed, filled with explosives firing superheated copper at supersonic speeds through the Humvee.

Medrano could taste dust and sulfur; he smelled burning rubber. His left shoulder was destroyed; his right hand torn. He heard a voice, soft, calm, matter of fact: "Oh, my God."

It was Funcheon.

Medrano, reeling from the concussive blast, had trouble opening his eyes, and when he got them open they burned from dust in the Humvee. He peered through the dust. Funcheon had collapsed out of the turret straps on his left side, his head in Botello's lap, his feet on Medrano's wrecked shoulder. He looked dead. Up front, Botello and Martin lay limp in their seats, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

Medrano screamed again, and said a silent prayer. "Oh, Lord, let me hold my kids again!" Immediately he felt at peace. "I knew then that I was gonna make it." He felt himself going into shock, but wanted to help Funcheon and the others. He tried to move his arms; his left was paralyzed, his right hand torn.

"Sgt. Medrano!"

Medrano saw a face at Botello's window. It was Jon Loera, the platoon medic. "Doc Loera!" Medrano called out. "I'm OK!" But he was not.

The platoon sergeant, Walter Greene, yanked Medrano's door open. Greene gripped Medrano's armor with both hands, pulled him gently to the ground, and pulled a knife. Greene and Loera sliced armor and clothing off Medrano's torso, looking for wounds pumping blood.

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Bland, enraged, peered in the driver's window at Botello; the boy was still breathing. Bland felt sick. A few days before, Bland, Funcheon and the rest of them, goofing on Botello, had suggested one sickly-sweet sentiment after another, and Botello eagerly wrote them all down; he was wooing a girl and had begged help writing her. Bland could see now that Botello was dying.

Bland looked inside the Humvee, and saw and smelled what he expected; he'd been inside bombed Humvees before. The Iranian bombs sometimes punch only small holes in the outsides of vehicles, but inside, it's all shredded metal and body parts, cooked flesh, dust, burning plastic and the sulfur smell of explosives.

Bland peered down the road, his M4 in his hands. Iraqi police officers, standing at their checkpoint, stared at him, relaxed and calm. "Probably in on the bombing," Bland thought.

He wanted to hose them with his M4.

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"The only time you should freak out is if you see guys in class A's walk up to the door.

--Alex Funcheon, e-mailing his mother, Jan. 24, 2007

Half an hour after the blast, Black Hawk helicopters blew clouds of dust in the air as they rose into the sunshine, carrying a bleeding Medrano, and the bodies of his dead buddies to a hospital.

1st Platoon went to their bunks at the Iraqi police station barracks and sat staring at nothing.

Army specialists in Baghdad called specialists back home.

In the leafy Bel Aire neighborhood where Funcheon had grown up, his mother heard a knock.

She saw, through small windows in the door, that the two men standing outside wore U.S. Army Class A dress uniforms.

"Go away," she told them, when she opened the door.

"We're sorry," one man said. "But we need to come in."

"Go away," she said. "I don't want to hear it."

She screamed, a long wail.

Karen Funcheon collapsed on the sofa in the living room where Alex had slept off hangovers. She screamed again. Gloria, Alex's little sister, still wrapped in a robe from her shower, reached out to her.

When Karen called her husband's cell phone, she wailed. Bob Funcheon could not understand at first.

He came home still holding the water bottle he'd carried on the golf course. He hurled the bottle across his yard.

He was so angry that he wanted to confront God and demand an explanation.

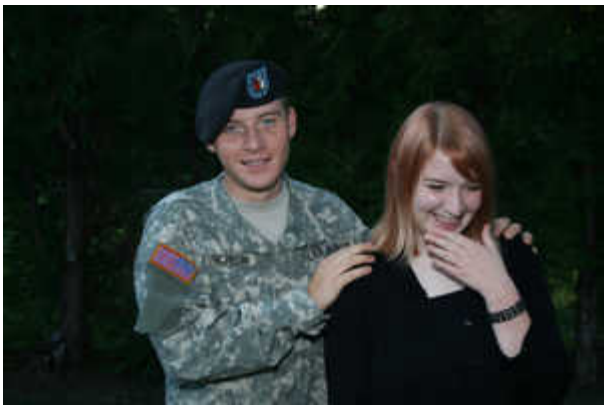
Within six weeks, he'd confront President Bush.

FOR ALEX: PART TWO

Family and friends grieve for Alex

BY ROY WENZL

The Wichita Eagle



Alex and Gloria have their picture taken together when Alex is home on leave one last time in September 2006, shortly before deploying to Iraq.

Bob and Karen Funcheon talk about some of the problems their son Alex dealt with as a teenager.

"Don't worry ill be coming home before you know it."

- Alex Funcheon, e-mailing his parents, five days before he was killed in action

Five days after Alex died, a tornado nearly two miles wide blew the western Kansas town of Greensburg to splinters. A dozen died. Dozens injured.

Four days after that, the Funcheons buried Alex in a cemetery north of Wichita.

"Yesterday, my brother was put into the ground," his little sister Gloria wrote in her diary. "People got out of their cars to watch. Police saluted. Strangers cried. In the limo no one spoke so I looked out the window. Looked into the faces of strangers looking at me."

The day after the funeral, President Bush appeared in Greensburg, kissing homeless mothers on the cheek, hugging children, chatting up little old ladies beside basements gaping at blue sky. The Funcheons watched this on the news.

Air Force One had landed in Wichita so Bush could fly in a helicopter to Greensburg. Bob growled at the TV: "He should have called us."

Gloria rolled her eyes. Did her father feel entitled?

Gloria was 18, just graduating, a stalwart on East High School's champion debate team. She had an inclination for blunt talk. In the 10 days since Alex died, her parents' grief had begun to irritate her. Her father, usually even-tempered, had become short-fused. The idea that the busy president somehow "owed" them a visit irritated her, though she didn't like Bush.

She thought Bush had killed her brother and everybody else in his Humvee. She'd joined the debate team four years before, in part because the Alex she adored then had been on his school debate team. Alex had gone on to become a dope-head dropout, but she became a student with a future, good grades and high skill. Debate either sharpens ideas or exposes weaknesses in logic. She found plenty to expose about Iraq, U.S. foreign policy, and George W. Bush's leadership. Her parents supported Bush and the war. And the war killed Alex.

One hundred Americans were killed in April 2007, the worst month so far. Bush's Republican allies were deserting him in Congress.

And now that Alex was dead, her father was angry, and sarcastic about politics, and her mother retreated to the bathroom every day and turned on the fan thinking no one could hear her sobbing.

Alex had been a jerk to them; Bob had been so worried about Alex's petty crimes that he had taken Karen to consult a lawyer about what their liabilities might be if Alex became a criminal.

Gloria despised what he'd become. Karen still defended him, blamed the drugs, and remembered the good boy Alex had been. One day, she said, her little boy brought home a dead frog flattened by cars, and cried at how it suffered. But then Alex smoked pot morning, noon and night, including before he dropped out of Heights High School.

Karen was sure he had come out of the drug fog in the Army. From Iraq he had sent pleading e-mails: Send German CDs; he was studying German. Send guitar lessons; he was learning guitar.

In late December, she learned, he'd been given a horrible task. A roadside bomb exploded beside a Humvee, killing soldiers. Officers ordered him to climb into the wrecked cab with the blood and body parts and strip the Humvee of anything useful to the enemy. He'd done that, and then, days later, after Karen's father died, Alex e-mailed from Iraq: "u still grieving your dads death? You want to talk about it?"

That was the real Alex, she said. Her boy becoming the man he was meant to be.

She wanted to stop breathing. She wanted to die.

But Gloria --"Glo," as her Dad called her -- was trying to ride this out. She visited friends. She sat in long silences, the pale skin of her face framed by strawberry blonde hair, her look composed.

She cried for her brother, but she also told mourners the truth -- she loved him, he was a screw-up. While she studied, while she earned a spot as an International Baccalaureate student at East High School, Alex got drunk, got laid, got high, treated his parents with contempt, and treated her cruelly, bullying her in grade school, ignoring or taunting her in high school.

He'd joined the Army, she said, "because he had no other place to go." Before he enlisted in 2004, he'd dropped out of school and lived in a trailer with listless friends.

At his funeral the day before, Gloria and Andrew Eldridge, Alex's best friend, had listened in puzzlement to e-mail messages read aloud from Alex's fellow soldiers.

Eldridge loved Alex, the natural leader, the guy who got the parties started, but even Eldridge conceded how mean Alex had become. And now they heard sincere tributes from combat soldiers.

Her parents said the Army had grown up Alex.

"Maybe," Gloria said. "But I never saw it."

But sometimes, sitting at the kitchen table, Gloria's eyes strayed to a bookshelf a few feet away, where two photographs had been stuck into a crack to make them stand up together: Alex in fourth grade, Gloria in first grade, their hair cut exactly the same -- bangs in front.

Gloria adored her big brother so much back then that she'd told the barber to cut her hair like his.

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"I think i was here for 2 hours before we got our first rockets from them. They obviously dont like us to much."

--Alex Funcheon, Oct. 30, 2006, in one of his first e-mails from Iraq

Every night now in Baghdad, 1st Platoon Lt. Jon Bland went to bed dreaming visions of blood.

Every night his mind replayed Funcheon's Humvee disappearing in a blast of flame and dust. Every night he slept under the same roof as Iraqis, some of them probably traitors, and wondered whether Funcheon and Martin and the others had died because Bland screwed up.

Every night before he went to sleep he relived the blast moment by moment, including how he'd wanted to hose the Iraqi bystanders with his M4.

And every morning he slipped 30-bullet magazines into pouches and took 1st Platoon on patrol.

They'd come here gung-ho, laughing at Martin's political sermons and Funcheon's alcohol-drenched stories. Now, surrounded by enemies, grieving for dead brothers, 1st Platoon patrolled relentlessly, trusting no one.

FOR ALEX: PART THREE

Alex's family finds out there was a survivor

BY ROY WENZL

The Wichita Eagle

After Alex died, the Funcheons found themselves wrapped in the good intentions of friends and neighbors.

"Sufficed to say, there are no doubts in my mind as to if people care about me or not, Gloria wrote in her diary. "But when everyone leaves, I am immeasurably sad."

When Bob complained bitterly to God about Alex's death, it wasn't a loss of faith. Bob, knowing his temper and his failures, had dedicated his life to Christ because he knew he was a sinner who fell short of God's expectations. One day when Alex was 13, Karen had walked out on Bob for a couple of days, taking the kids, after Alex deftly goaded Bob into slapping him.

Karen didn't like Alex's cruel behavior either, or the way he broke basement windows to get back in after sneaking out. But she drew the line at slapping.

She and Bob took solace in an intense faith that led them not only to church but good works. Once a month they went into Kansas prisons to minister. They did not like Christians who judged. His faith, Bob said, was rooted in the belief that a follower of Christ reaches out.

This obligation would soon bring him face to face a with man he'd never heard about -- a man lucky to be alive but wishing he was dead.

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Five weeks after Alex died, Karen Funcheon picked up The Wichita Eagle and read that President Bush was coming back to Wichita, this time to dedicate the new Boys & Girls Club and speak at a fundraiser for Sen. Pat Roberts.

She went into the house with sudden animation. Bob had said Bush should have called them, that he "owed' them that. Karen agreed. She and Bob both still supported the war, and Bush because of his conservative views and faith. But with the war going bad and opposition mounting, they wondered whether the dead had died for nothing.

With the newspaper story before her, Karen called a man she thought could help her.

Sgt. Charles Austin Hilt of the U.S. Army Reserves was their Casualty Assistance Officer, the soldier who had arranged for Alex's body to come home. The Army paid for the burial.

Hilt, an Iraq War veteran, was a soldier in an Army Reserve finance unit who had never served as a Casualty Assistance Officer before. It upset him to do it, but he won the Funcheons' gratitude. Besides kindness, he'd shown resourcefulness arranging the transport, cutting red tape. He steadied their nerves.

Karen told him they wanted to see Bush. "Just five to seven minutes," she said. "And no media. Tell the president we're not doing this to put on a show. We won't do anything to embarrass him."

There was a little pause.

"I'll see what I can do," Hilt said.

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Two days later, at the chapel at Fort Carson, Colo., after the memorial service for Jay Martin, Brian Botello and Alex Funcheon, Bob marveled at the wounded soldiers. There were several at the chapel, hobbling, missing limbs. They were all so upbeat. But Bob saw they were finished as soldiers. Several said they'd hoped to have Army careers. What now?

He felt his anger growing. Alex and everybody in that Humvee had died, or so he thought. And now Bob saw crippled men, some just kids.

Were these men crippled for nothing?

In World War II, Bob's father, Bob Sr., had been shot three times fighting the Germans. He'd come home to a hero's welcome. Bob and Karen had a photo of teenage Alex wearing Bob Sr.' s World War II dress uniform.

But since then, Bob's brother Donald served in Vietnam and came home to indifference and sometimes hostility. Fifty-eight thousand Americans died there for nothing, Bob thought.

He was interrupted when he saw a soldier with a bandaged hand hobbling toward him.

And what that man said shocked him.

The families of the three dead soldiers had been led to believe that no one in the Humvee survived.

But that was not true.

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Sgt. Gerardo Medrano could barely walk. This little hike with his wife and kids into Fort Carson's chapel was the first time he'd gotten out of bed for more than a few minutes. For the short drive to the chapel, his wife had buckled his seat belt for him. What he saw in the chapel was harder to take than the bombing.

Botello's family was there, Medrano recalled later; and Sgt. Martin's family. He stood still, a bandage covering his maimed right hand; he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt in summer to cover burns; he felt weak and now sick with guilt that he was alive. The army captain who escorted Medrano told the families that Medrano was the survivor of the blast that killed everyone else in the Humvee.

The families sat in shock; some of them were angry at the Army. For a moment, they sat silent; then they told Medrano that they had no idea until this moment that anyone survived. They had been told no one survived.

They looked bewildered; Medrano too. He didn't know what to say.

"I'm so sorry," he said at last. Do they resent me? he wondered.

They stared at him.

"Did they suffer?" one family member asked.

"No," he said. "They did not suffer. They went quick. There was no pain. They went fast."

Alex's body had shielded Medrano from much of the blast. But the shrapnel paralyzed much of Medrano's left arm and ruined much of his right hand. He still had shrapnel in his body. He faced orthopedic and skin-graft surgeries. He would lose his right-hand index finger. He was only 28; he wondered if his Army career was over.

They talked for a while; they let him go. And then, a little later, he saw another family, the Funcheons, and went through another shocking, painful conversation.

Bob Funcheon teared up when Medrano introduced his wife, Rowena, Gabriel, 5, and Kallie, a year old. Medrano told the Funcheons that Alex had said, "Oh my God," at his death; that the suffering could not have lasted long.

He told Bob that he'd gone to war twice in Iraq, two tours. But he said this without pride. He felt only despair.

Bob said good-bye, and began to turn away.

"I regret that I made it," Medrano blurted out.

Bob turned on his heel.

"What?"

"I regret that I made it and Alex and the others didn't make it."

Bob looked at him for a moment. There was kindness in his voice, but an edge, too, and Medrano said later that what Bob said would stick with him for the rest of his life.

"Don't you dare think like that.

"You have a reason to live, you've got these two little ones to live for."

Bob teared up again. Medrano cried, too.

"Promise me something," Bob said. "Promise you will never ever feel bad for making it out of there.

"You've got to keep going strong.

"For your family.

"For the three guys who died.

"For Alex.

"Promise me."

Medrano promised.

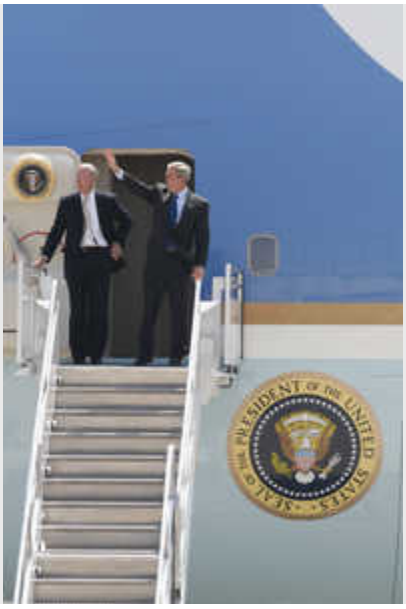
Eight days later, when the Funcheons mounted the steps of Air Force One, Karen carried Alex's dog tags, and Bob carried the despair he'd seen in Medrano's eyes.

FOR ALEX: PART FOUR

President Bush agrees to meet Alex's family during 2007 visit

BY ROY WENZL

The Wichita Eagle



Dave Williams

President Bush arrives at McConnell AFB along with Senator Pat Roberts. Roberts asked Bush if he would meet with the Funcheons while in route to Wichita.

June 15, 2007

On Air Force One, after it took off from Andrews Air Force Base, Kansas Sen. Pat Roberts could see that the president of the United States was ill.

Some sort of inner ear thing he picked up in Europe, President Bush told Roberts.

The plane banked southwest, toward Kansas. Bush had walked to the middle cabin to say hello; the two men had been friends for years, and allies in the bitter debates over the war, which on this day had lasted four years and cost more than 3,000 American dead.

More than 100 Americans died in April, including Sgt. Alex Funcheon from Wichita, whom Roberts had heard about after the Army's casualty assistance officer, Sgt. Charles Austin Hilt, contacted his staff.

Bush's Republican allies were deserting him.

I want to pick your brain on several things, but I'm not feeling too good here; I've got a cold, Bush told Roberts. I'm going to take a nap and then talk with you if that's OK.

"No problem, Mr. President," Roberts replied.

Roberts took a seat, and for a few minutes, as the big blue-and-white plane flew over mountains and prairies, he reviewed what he wanted to mention to Bush.

Roberts had agonized over war long before Bush ordered the Iraq invasion in 2003, long before terrorists flew planes into New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C.

For many years Roberts had served as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. The nation's intelligence people had briefed him repeatedly. The briefings, and the apathy he encountered when he tried to warn other people, weighed him down with worry.

He'd spent years "almost jumping up and down," as he put it later, trying to get President Clinton's people, and then Bush's people, to realize something big and terrible was brewing overseas, probably a direct attack on the U.S. In Kansas, especially after the USS Cole warship was attacked by suicide bombers in 2000, Roberts included in every speech in every town a warning that something big loomed and that the U.S. was not preparing adequately.

Then one morning Roberts drove to work at the Capitol watching smoke rise from the Pentagon; when he reached the Capitol, he was hustled to a safe place and learned, from intelligence briefings, that the Air Force was scrambling F-16s to shoot down any passenger plane approaching the city.

When he spoke, later that Sept. 11, about F-16s scrambling to blow civilians out of the sky, the horror of it choked him up.

A year and a half later, in early 2003, Bush ordered the U.S. invasion of Iraq. And now, in 2007, the war had turned into a dreary routine of roadside bombings and casualty reports.

The president reappeared.

Can't sleep, Bush said. We might as well talk.

They walked up front, sat down in Bush's Air Force One office -- a small, well-lit space with a desk, an extra chair and a couch, room enough for a half-dozen or more people. Bush called out the door to a steward: Could you make me a peanut butter and jelly? Then, they talked about war and government.

OK, Bush said, after a pause. Is there anything else you want to bring up?

"Yes," Roberts said. "There's a family that lost a young man in Iraq, and they'd like to meet you. They've talked with your staff, but it would be a favor to them and a personal favor to me if you could meet them."

Bush hesitated.

What kind of a family are they?

"They just want to meet with you because they lost their son. They don't want to do anything to embarrass you."

OK. Sure. I'll make that the last thing I do there today, I'll meet with them.

"Thank you. That will mean a lot to them and to me," Roberts said.

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As Air Force One banked over Wichita in a sunny sky, Roberts had no illusions about how meeting Sgt. Funcheon's family would touch Bush: It would touch him deeply, because Bush was a decent man. But it would not change his mind about the war.

"He doesn't like the criticism," Roberts would say later. "He doesn't like the 'Hate Bush' crowd. And he knows he's right. He's sure of it. When you get to know him, you see he's got this tremendous resolve that what we've done is right, that it's necessary, that we went in there to try to bring stability to the Middle East."

Roberts knew Bush met frequently, without fanfare, with families of dead soldiers.

"I hate to say it, but he's good at it," Roberts would say later. "Good at it in the sense that he appreciates their sacrifice. And that it is for something."

When the plane landed, Roberts descended the steps with Bush and watched the president shrug off the head-cold sluggishness. On the Boeing tarmac, under a warm sun, Bush stripped off his blue suit jacket, rolled up his shirtsleeves, and shook hands with a wall of people along a fence line, Boeing employees who had come out to cheer him enthusiastically. Much of the work on Air Force One had been done here.

The Funcheons -- Bob, Karen and Gloria -- were at home, steeling themselves for the meeting. Bob had put on a gray dress shirt, and chose deliberately to not put on a necktie.

"I wanted Bush to see me casual," he said later. "It was a quiet message to him -- that we are equals."

FOR ALEX: PART FIVE

Alex's family meets Bush during 2007 Wichita trip

BY ROY WENZL

The Wichita Eagle

President Bush visits with the Funcheon family on Air Force One. The family was able to arrange a private meeting with the president when Bush was in Wichita in June 2007 to dedicate the new Boys & Girls Club.

Sgt. Charles Austin Hilt picked up the surviving Funcheons in a blue government van at 1:30 p.m., while the president lunched and cracked jokes at a fundraiser for Sen. Pat Roberts.

Bob Funcheon had called Hilt the night before and told him, "You're going with us." The sergeant objected; this meeting should be for them only, Hilt said. Bob had a high regard for Hilt, who had helped them arrange Alex's funeral. He repeated: "You're going." Hilt was dressed now in a smart-looking beret and Class A dress uniform.

The president, staffers said, would meet with them in a small office in a hangar at Boeing's manufacturing plant in southeast Wichita.

Bob had been irritated at President Bush for not calling them weeks before. But he still thought Bush's war was the right thing to do.

Gloria, who disagreed, listened to her Dad think out loud. Bob looked at her. "You do realize," Bob told his daughter, "they have the Secret Service right there."

He was teasing. Gloria looked away.

When her parents had told her that the president would meet with them, she'd blurted out, "I'm not going." She thought Bush had sent her brother to his death.

Karen tried reason. "You really should go."

Gloria finally agreed. "I'll never get a chance to do something like this ever again." But the "something" she had in mind had nothing to do with the novelty of meeting a world leader.

Bob looked at her now.

"You can say anything you want," he said.

"But you have to be polite," Karen said. "You can't say anything mean."

"Well," Gloria said. "I guess I can promise you that I don't want to say anything that will put me in Guantanamo."

Bob smiled.

Karen's cell phone rang. It was a woman from Boeing.

"She says there's been a change of plan, and that they will take us to some airplane to meet him instead," Karen said, puzzled.

"What airplane, I wonder?"

Gloria grinned.

"Air Force One," she said.

• • •

The van took them around a corner, and Bob caught his breath again. There was Air Force One, "looking huge and blue and magnificent," as Bob said later, gleaming in the clear midday sunlight.

They pulled up to the nose. Bob's pulse beat faster. They got out, and five black-jacketed Secret Service agents told them in crisp, polite tones that they had to run wands over them, checking for weapons. Karen, worried, told them she was carrying metal.

"It's my son's dog tags," she said. The agents allowed them.

They turned to the steps.

"My God," Bob thought. "This is really going to happen."

What happened next seemed surreal. Air Force One's chief steward gave them a tour of the plane, including the president's private office; they all got to sit in Bush's desk chair.

Air Force officers on board, seeing Hilt's Army uniform, looked him up and down and asked "Are you lost?" Hilt opened a drawer in Bush's desk, and found a humidor with a half-smoked presidential cigar.

"Is it Cuban?" Bob asked.

Hilt looked. "No," he said.

A Secret Service agent said the president had arrived outside. He told Hilt, politely, to get out.

And then it was time.

• • •

Bush bounded up the airplane's steps and came into his office quickly, as though still bounding. Bob was startled to see that Bush looked exhausted; Bush did not tell them about the head cold. Bob, a longtime

salesman, noticed Bush shook hands straight up and down. Some men rudely turn the other man's hand palm-up. Not Bush.

"Mr. President, I'm Bob Funcheon."

Bush let go of Bob's hand, shook Karen's and kissed her on the cheek; then shook hands with Gloria and kissed her on the cheek. He motioned them to the couch; he sat down not at the desk but in the chair in front of the desk, "Laura's chair," the steward had called it. Bush's left knee was inches from Gloria's knees as she sat facing him. Bush leaned forward, elbows on knees; Gloria thought that if she did the same, the two of them would touch foreheads.

I'm sorry for the loss of your son, Bush said. And this is the reason I sent him over there:

I sent him because we have to stop them, we have to stop them over there and keep them from coming over here, Bush said. We need to be over there because Iraq needs to get a stable and democratic form of government going over there. The form of government they end up with is very important to us.

Karen, who liked Bush, was not impressed. It's the same stuff you hear on the news, she thought. Then she saw Bush watching Gloria with a look of bemusement. The girl was taking a blank sheet of paper out of a pocket and folding it into quarters. She took out a pen.

So Gloria, Bush said in a quiet tone. Tell me about your brother.

"He was a troublemaker," Gloria said.

A silence followed; Bush seemed to be caught off guard. He smiled, chuckled, and looked at Bob as Gloria looked at Bush with a steady gaze.

"Alex had had a few problems and had gotten into a little trouble like a lot of guys that age do," Bob said. "He got into the military for the same reasons a lot of other guys do. But then in the Army Alex had begun to grow and mature, had been promoted to sergeant in only three years in the army, and at the age of only 21."

Bush nodded. He turned to Gloria again.

What are you, 16, right?

"Eighteen," she corrected him.

Where do you go to school?

"I'm enrolling in Kansas State University."

Good school, Bush said.

"I also got accepted into American University in Washington," Gloria said, an edge to her voice. "But I'm going to KSU."

Bush glanced at her parents, and appeared to sense (correctly) that American University was where Gloria had wanted to go, and that someone (Karen) had pushed for K-State.

Nah, Bush said. Kansas State is a better school.

Everyone smiled.

What do you want to major in?

"History."

Really! I majored in history too. (Bush received a degree in history at Yale in 1968.)

He smiled.

Bob interrupted, and began reciting what he'd rehearsed for days.

"Mr. President, we came to see you here because there are a couple of things I wanted to say to you."

Bush leaned back, listening.

"Karen and I support you, and we support what you are doing in Iraq... although, I should tell you, our daughter Gloria does not."

Bush looked at Gloria and nodded. Well, OK... but she's entitled to her opinion, Bush said.

He looked at Gloria and started to say more, but Bob interrupted. Bush sat back, listening.

"This is what I wanted to say," Bob said: "When my dad came back from World War II, he had been shot three times, and he had had some psychological problems, but he was honored when he came back and he felt like the sacrifice he had made had been worth something. But then when my brother came home from Vietnam, it wasn't like that at all.

"When my son was killed, he came back, and he was honored at his funeral. But I began to resign myself to the idea that his life had meant something to us and to his buddies... but I felt like his death meant nothing in the war on terrorism."

"But then after we went to my son's memorial service at Fort Carson, and I met several other wounded soldiers... as if his death wasn't enough, there were these guys out there, maimed and hurt, and this upset me nearly as much as Alex's death.

"So I decided to come talk to you... and tell you... that when you get down and discouraged... when you get down about this, I want you to think of my son, and those guys. And I want you to reach down deep and discover and do what needs to be done in this war, so that those guys, 20 or 30 years from now, will be able to look back and think that everything they had gone through and sacrificed, that it was WORTH it."

Bob paused for a moment, startled at how it had all come out. He was lecturing the president of the United States.

Bush listened. Bob wondered: Have I gone too far?

"We support you," Bob said. "And we are here to encourage you."

This surprised Bush.

Well, wait a minute, Bush said. I should be encouraging you, and here you are encouraging me.

He peered at Bob.

You don't sound bitter, the president said. Are you?

FOR ALEX: PART SIX

Gloria has questions for the president

BY ROY WENZL

The Wichita Eagle

Less than than two months after he was killed in combat in Iraq, the family of Alex Funcheon step aboard Air Force One to have a word with President Bush.

You don't seem bitter, the president of the United States had just told the Funcheon family. Are you?

Karen thought this was an odd question. Of course they were bitter. They had lost their son Alex six weeks before. Karen had wanted to die every day since.

"No," Bob said.

You... well, Bush said, his voice trailing off.

He thought for a moment.

I'm supposed to be the encourager here, he said.

The Funcheons looked puzzled. Bush tried to explain:

Well... the word around the White House is that I'm the Encourager in Chief, among other things. Word is that I'm the Commander in Chief, the Decider in Chief... the Encourager in Chief.

Apparently this was a White House joke. Bush smiled.

"Well, we are here to encourage you," Bob said. "To make it worthwhile. To make the war worthwhile."

Karen unfolded a paper she'd held in her hand.

"I guess it's my turn.

"Just like your mother and father raised you and your brothers to be God-fearing and to be leaders, we raised our children to be God-fearing and to be leaders," Karen said.

She paused, then handed Bush three photos of Alex.

Then she handed him Alex's dog tags.

"It is important to me that you remember my son," she said.

Bush appeared startled, and deeply moved.

A few moments passed.

Are you sure you want to give me his dog tags? he asked.

"Yes," Karen said.

Well, Bush said.

Another moment passed.

I'm going to have a presidential library, Bush said. And these dog tags will be in my library.

Bush slowly picked up the photographs. In one, taken by Lt. Jon Bland, Alex stares defiantly at the camera, wearing desert camo and the brown-billed "Playboy Club Baghdad" cap with the long-eared bunny on the front.

Bush grinned, and looked quizzically at Bob.

"We're not crazy about the hat," Bob said. Bush laughed.

Bob stood up. He felt like God had opened a door.

"Mr. President," he said. "I would like to pray for you."

Bush stood quickly, bowed his head, and reached out. He took Bob's left hand in his right, and Gloria's right hand in his left. Karen held Bob and Gloria's hands. A prayer circle of four.

Bob bowed his head.

"I pray that God will give you insight," Bob said. "That God will give you understanding, that God will open a pathway before you.

"I pray for your and Laura's marriage, that you will trust each other and see each other as you once did."

They stood still for a moment, heads bowed. They slowly released each other's hands.

And Gloria spoke.

"Can I ask a couple of questions?"

• • •

Bob braced himself; Karen too. Karen noticed that Gloria did not say "Mr. President," the way the rest of the world did. Nor did Gloria ever say it in the conversation that followed.

She took up her note paper and her pen again, and looked at Bush with a steady gaze.

Sure, Bush said.

She explained that at Wichita East High School she had recently qualified for the National Forensics League Student Senate.

Go ahead, Bush said.

"OK, well, given that the Cold War theoretically ended in 1989, why are we still practicing the policy of containment with the Cuban embargo?"

Here comes Gloria, Bob thought.

Bush shook his head.

We need to keep it in place because it's a communist tyranny there. That country is run by gangsters who profit from the exchange of dollars. When dollars come in from trade, the Cuban government takes the dollars, exchanges them for Cuban pesos, and that's what they pay to the people who earned the dollars; the government makes a lot of money off the exchange. All that would happen if we lifted the embargo would be that the tyrants would get richer and the poor over there would get poorer.

Gloria looked at him. If this was a real debate, she said later, she already had him on a hook -- but he had been nice to her, and he was the president, so she ignored the temptation to point out that the U.S. traded billions of dollars with other supposed tyrannies, China, Venezuela.

"I have another question."

"Gloria," Bob said.

No, no, Bush said, waving Bob off. Let her ask her questions.

"Is it possible to grant amnesty to illegal immigrants currently living in the U.S.?" Gloria asked. "What should our policy be on illegal immigration?"

A complex issue, Bush said. On one side are those who want to get all the illegal aliens out of the country, every last one of them.

And that is just totally impractical, Bush said. There is no way we can deport 12 million people; it isn't going to happen.

On the other side, Bush said, there are those who want to let everyone come in. The best solution was somewhere in the middle, to find a way to let people become citizens in an orderly way, to integrate them, to have them pay taxes and receive services.

Gloria asked another question.

"Are you worried about the Palestinian militant group Hamas and their recent take-over of the Gaza Strip, and did you have any plans to try to talk to the leaders of Hamas? Shouldn't the United States at least consider the idea of talking with them?"

No, Bush said. They are a terrorist organization, and their stated goal is to overthrow the state of Israel. You can't talk with terrorists. How can you talk to them, when their stated goal is to wipe out Israel?

Bob interrupted again.

"We need to go."

Bush smiled. It's all right, he said. What's your next question?

Gloria had caught the look on her father's face.

"Dad?"

Bob shrugged. "Gloria, he said you could ask another question." He almost laughed; the leader of the free world had just given Gloria permission to keep interrogating him, and this cool-eyed girl had turned to her father asking approval.

She asked about terror in Indonesia and what Bush and the U.S. were doing to work with Australia to curb it.

Bush sat back, startled at her depth of knowledge. Bob felt a surge of pride. How many 18-year-old American kids know about the Indonesian problem?

Bush glanced at Bob. She is going to be a great leader someday, Bush said. He turned to Gloria.

You're absolutely right, he said. The U.S. is indeed very concerned about terrorism in Indonesia and in the Pacific, and the U.S. is playing a behind-the-scenes role, letting Australia take the lead, helping and advising them.

Bush looked at Gloria now with some wonder.

"I have another question," she said.

Bob felt panic rising. But he could tell, and he thought Bush could see also, that Gloria had melted. She had read for years now that Bush might be an inarticulate and unfocused goof; she could see he was none of those things.

Go ahead, Bush said.

"Do you think it would ever be good to have a national ban on smoking?"

No. We tried that with alcohol, and it didn't work.

Bob was sweating; he thought the temperature in the room had risen considerably. He wondered, though he knew it was preposterous, whether the pilot had deliberately turned off the air conditioner. Bob nodded to Gloria with a look that said, "Enough!"

At that moment, though the President had made no sign, the door opened, and a photographer walked in. Bush stood up.

The photographer posed four photos. He took a family portrait with the president, then posed the president with each of them alone.

What do you want to do when you get out of school? Bush asked Gloria.

"International relations," she said. "I want to be a diplomat."

Bush looked delighted. He began reciting "chapter and verse," as Gloria said later, about how to go about this, what classes to take; he even named Web sites she could check out. He wasn't just the president, Gloria realized; he was the son of a president who had been a diplomat. He knew this stuff.

But understand, Bush told her with a grin, you're not going to become a diplomat right off the bat, you'll have to work your way up to that.

And it was over. Or so Bob thought.

"Could I ask something of you?" Gloria said.

Bob felt panic again.

Sure, Bush said.

"Could I get your autograph for two of my friends?"

Bob and Karen looked at Glo with surprise.

Sure, Bush said. He turned to his desk, picked up a pen and a pad of Air Force One stationery.

Only two? Bush asked.

"Yes."

Why only two?

Gloria looked at him coolly.

"Those are the only two Republican friends I have."

Bush grinned.

Well, Bob thought. At least he knows she's not a kiss-up.

"My friends are Creighton and Jordan," Gloria said.

"To Creighton," Bush wrote. "Best Wishes... "and signed the paper. He signed one for Jordan.

Anybody else?

Gloria hesitated.

"I guess I would like to have one, too," Gloria said.

Bush smiled and wrote.

He shook hands.

They stepped out the door, met Army Sgt. Charles Austin Hilt, their Casualty Assistance Officer, walked to the back of Air Force One, and walked out the back doorway ladder to the concrete below.

Outside, television and newspaper reporters, guarded by police and Secret Service agents, had baked in the heat for 45 minutes. The Funcheons walked slowly past, inches from notepads and cameras.

The reporters stood silent at first. They quickly figured out that Bush had met with a soldier's family. They wanted to know what was said on the plane. A couple of reporters started to ask questions; the Funcheons waved them off.

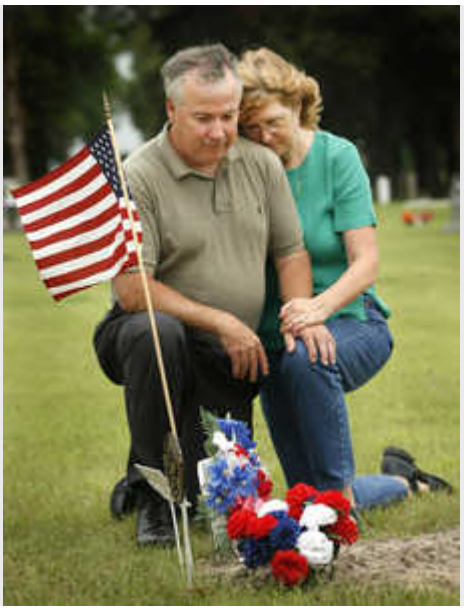
For a long time, the Funcheons didn't say anything to anyone but their closest friends.

FOR ALEX: PART SEVEN

Life after Alex's death

BY ROY WENZL

The Wichita Eagle



fernando salazar

Bob and Karen Funcheon at the gravesite of their only son, US Army Sgt. Alex Funcheon who was killed last month in Iraq. The couple hopes their faith in God will help them through this ordeal.

Family and friends find solace at Alex's grave

Down this road

That i walk

So many turns

So much thought

Where are we going?

Where is the end?

Where are you now?

Why is it dark

once again?

I can hear your voice

calling out to me

God shine your light!

so that i can see

Fragment of a poem by Alex Funcheon, undated

In the 20 months since Alex Funcheon rode down the road to his death, the war that killed him took more lives, though the killing tapered off.

Generals serving President Bush said the troop surge worked.

In September 2007, five months after Alex died, his platoon commander, Lt. Jon Bland, was again riding in the second vehicle of 1st Platoon's convoy when a bomb blew up the lead Humvee, an explosion so big that soldiers in the rear thought both the lead Humvee and Bland's Humvee had disintegrated.

But this time, because the Iraqi trigger man fired the bomb too late, the copper shrapnel ripped through the lead truck's cargo bay and missed the soldiers.

First Platoon was supposed to come home in October, six months after Alex died, but the Army extended many combat tours. Exhausted and grieving, 1st Platoon fought an extra three months.

By then, Bland, a 25-year-old college graduate, a patriot who had volunteered for combat "so that I could really do something for my country," had been removed from command.

In the months that followed, he declined to say why, except that it had something to do with questioning superiors about sending 1st Platoon on too many risky missions.

When Bland and Alex's buddies left Iraq in December, Bland struggled with his marriage and his grief. He said that in spite of thousands dead and billions spent, Iraq was no safer or more secure.

He still blamed himself for the deaths of Alex Funcheon, Brian Botello, Jay Martin and Murphy, the Iraqi interpreter. He still dreamed about blood.

In October 2008 he left the Army.

He drove from Fort Carson, Colo., toward Raleigh, N.C., where his parents live.

But after a day of driving, Bland stopped in Bel Aire, Kan. He'd met the Funcheons a few months before, when they came to Fort Carson and met the survivors of 1st Platoon. Now the Funcheons gave him a bed for the night.

At his request, they took him to Alex's grave, in a cemetery north of Wichita.

Bland is not religious. But he asked for a few minutes alone. He stood silent beside Sgt. Funcheon.

Later, after he reached Raleigh, he admitted that something he had seen at Alex's grave bothered him.

On the gray granite tombstone, the Army had carved:

ALEXANDER J FUNCHEON

SGT US ARMY

IRAQ

MAR 2 1986

APR 29 2007

But on the tombstone's other side, Bob had ordered more words:

CALVARY SCOUT

HE EARNED

HIS SPURS

Bland noted that the word was not spelled "cavalry" as in mechanized armored unit, but as "Calvary," the name of the place where Christ died.

Alex's folks were religious.

Was this deliberate? Or a typo carved in stone?

"Should I say anything to them?" Bland wondered.

He decided not to.

• • •

Months earlier, on Sept. 11, 2007, at Kansas State University, soldiers walked onto campus to mark the sixth anniversary of the terrorist attacks. When freshman Gloria Funcheon saw the camo fatigues, she got upset.

Later, when someone at her dorm overheard her vent her feelings, authorities were called, and Gloria was taken to a hospital and asked whether she felt suicidal. She did not feel suicidal and had a Spanish test to study for. Answering this question infuriated her.

Bob smiled when he heard. "I feel sorry for anyone trying to corral that girl."

Karen Funcheon cried in her bathroom alone many times.

She says she has cried every day since Alex died.

She makes quilts for families of killed and wounded soldiers. She and Bob, in spite of the pain it causes them, counsel other soldiers' grieving families.

For a long time, Karen carried a snapshot and showed it to friends. It shows Alex's broken body in his Class A uniform lying in his casket.

The autopsy report, which the Funcheons requested, showed that the copper shrapnel shredded Alex's body from shoulders to knees. Death was nearly instantaneous.

• • •

They all watched the long national election cycle. So did Sen. Pat Roberts, who has met many families of Kansas soldiers killed in Iraq.

Roberts spoke with The Eagle about the Funcheons in December 2007, when the primary elections had not yet resolved whether the Democratic Party would nominate Sen. Barack Obama or Sen. Hillary Clinton.

Roberts, who personally liked his two Senate colleagues, thought they were wrong about the war.

Democrats, he said, "are content to let the Bush-haters have their way with him."

If Democrats won the White House, he said, "then they will have to take charge, and they might be saying something entirely different then.

"They will be the ones who will inherit the wind. They know, because they get the same briefings that I get, how dangerous it would be for the world if we just picked up stakes and left."

Bush himself, in an interview with ABC News anchor Charles Gibson on Dec. 1, spoke candidly about his regrets over the war.

He said U.S. intelligence agencies' incorrect claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction were the biggest disappointment of his presidency.

He said he was "unprepared" for war when he became president.

When asked whether he would have gone to war had he known the intelligence claims were wrong, he said "that is a do-over that I can't do."

But once those American soldiers got into Iraq, he said, he kept them there, even after the intelligence proved false, because "I listened to this voice: 'I'm not going to let your son die in vain.' "

• • •

From the moment he heard about Alex's death, Bob Funcheon wanted to know whether his son died for nothing.

In hundreds of prayers since then, he's told God he does not understand.

He still loves and trusts God; but he can't help but think that his troubled son was robbed of life just after he'd turned himself into a good person.

Bob and Karen counseled families; they made friendships that would not have been possible without the catalyst of grief.

• • •

Gloria goes to Alex's grave sometimes, on weekends home from K-State.

Karen goes once a month.

Bob goes at least once a week, and talks to his son.

Spelling "cavalry," as "Calvary" on the back of the tombstone was a simple spelling error, Bob said recently, embarrassed. He said Alex would have howled with laughter.

Bob talks to Alex a lot at his graveside. Sometimes in bitter tones.

"You dummy," he told Alex one day.

"I've met your Army buddies. All of them."

"They told me they looked up to you, that they trusted you with their lives. A scout platoon of some of the Army's best combat soldiers told me they put you in the lead Humvee on the most dangerous missions because you were the best they had.

"I never got to meet that guy, Alex.

"I never got to meet him.

"And now I never will."

• • •

The facts of Alex Funcheon's death are these:

When Alex joined the Army in 2004, Bob Funcheon was not proud of his son.

But after he died, having heard from Alex's fellow soldiers what kind of man Alex had turned himself into, Bob Funcheon and his wife sought a meeting with the president of the United States.

And they told the president they wanted the war to amount to something, because they were proud of Alex.

They gave him Alex's dog tags, and showed him Alex's photographs, because they were proud of him.

They brought their daughter aboard Air Force One, knowing she did not like Bush or his policies or his war, and they told her she could say anything she wanted to him. And their daughter grilled the president about his policies and his plans. They watched her go after him, and when they walked off that plane, Bob said, they held their heads high because of both their children.

He wondered for a long time whether Alex died for a purpose.

We may never know whether the Iraq war was worth it, Bob said.

But he knows one thing came out of his son's death.

He learned, from the intensity of his grief, that when someone dies, we must do what Bob himself had told Sgt. Medrano to do:

Keep on living. But don't do it just for yourself.

Do it for those you love.

Do it for your brothers.

Do it for Jay, and Brian. Do it for Alex.

About this series

Events described in these stories were drawn from interviews conducted over an 18-month period with the story subjects or from documents provided by the story subjects, or were witnessed by the reporter.

In most cases where dialogue is used, the majority of the subjects interviewed agree on the words that were spoken. The exception is Sen. Pat Roberts' conversation with President George W. Bush on Air Force One. That section was reconstructed based on the recollections of Roberts, a former journalist. ***Read more about the series***