



METRO-EAST NEWS

Love continues for Millstadt Marine who died saving his platoon from suicide bombing

By **Bruce Darnell**

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Childhood Friend of Fallen Marine Remembers Him Fondly



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Ben Theis's best friend as a child and young adult was Matt Wyatt. The two had planned on joining the Marine Corps together, and while Theis had to drop out for family commitments, Wyatt left for Iraq in 2004. Wyatt was killed by a car bomb that same year and now, 20 years later, a bill is being pushed for a post office to be named in his honor. In light of the bill, Theis spoke on his childhood best friend. By Joshua Carter

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U.S. Rep. Mike Bost, R-Murphysboro, recently proposed renaming the Millstadt post office to honor Cpl. Matthew Wyatt, a Marine and Millstadt native who died in 2004 in a suicide bombing in Iraq. Matt's 67-year-old mother, Verlene Wyatt, received the news through a friend of a friend.

That didn't upset her, though — and Bost later called her directly to apologize for not contacting her sooner. Instead, she was happy someone wanted to memorialize her son.

"I feel like he's very deserving of it," she said. "(But) Matt was very humble. He didn't do what he did for recognition — he wanted to make a difference."

When you visit Verlene's home in Millstadt, it's clear there will never be a larger memorial to her son.

Next to the front door is a shrine to Matt, a table with a collage of photos and military memorabilia sitting underneath framed photographs that form a cross; the frame in the middle says, "Welcome to the house that Matt built."

"The house that Matt built" is literal, because the money she received after his death

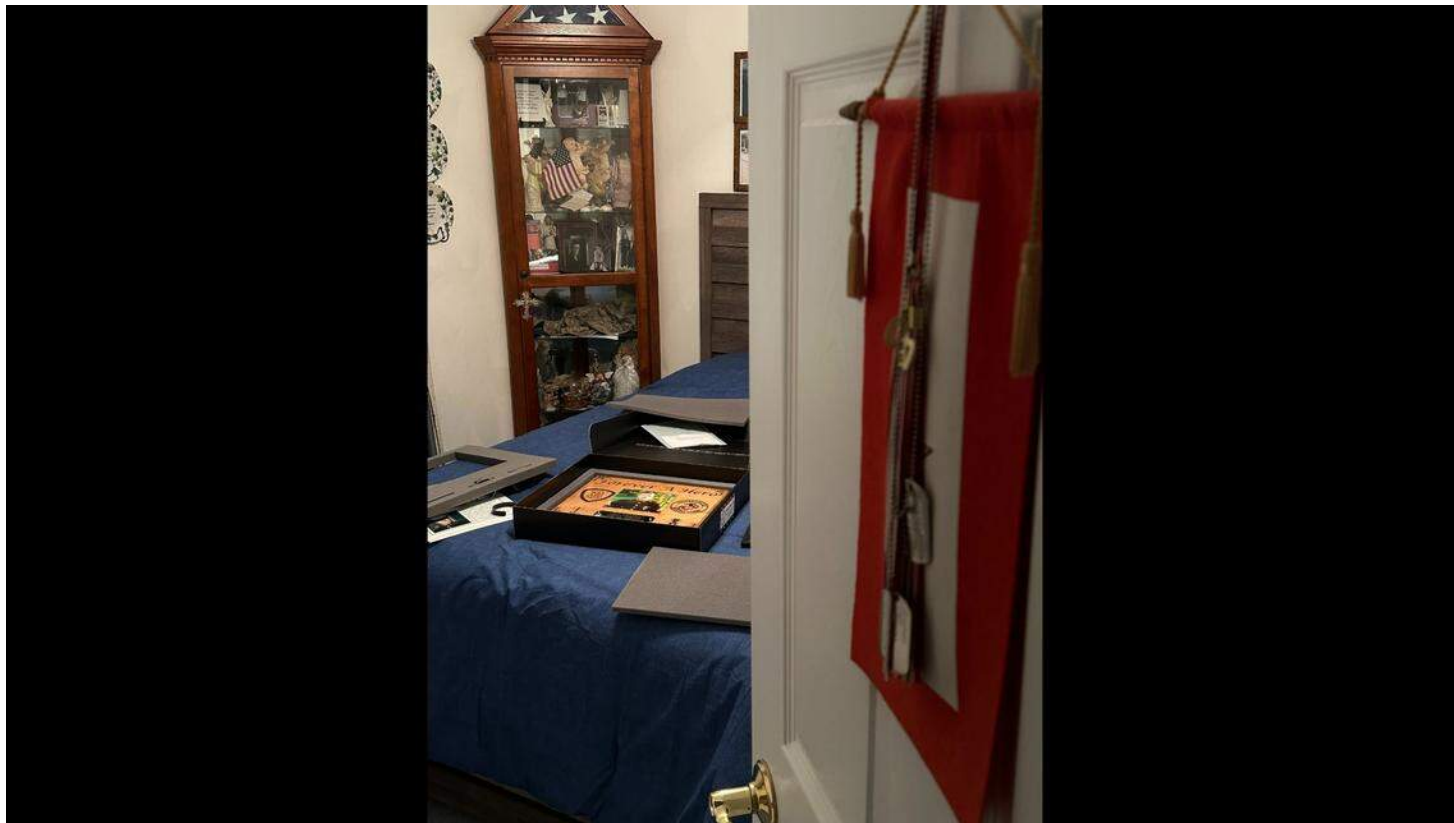
funded its construction in 2005, which Verlene said was a direct fulfillment of his wish for her to always be taken care of. “I wanted to have something that could last forever to honor him,” she said.

Matt is represented in each room of the house, with reminders of him placed everywhere. A framed photo here, a flag there. Verlene’s computer wallpaper is one of his senior portraits.

“I even have a room dedicated to him,” she said.

Down the hall, Matt’s dog tags and graduation tassels hang from a hook on a door. Inside is his room, neatly organized to show what was, in essence, his life.

“He’d drive here from North Carolina (where he was stationed) when he could,” she said. “I told him I’d make sure he’d always have a place to come home to.”



The door to Matthew Wyatt’s room stands open on July 15, 2024. There are dozens of pieces of Matt’s life that his mother, Verlene, has stored. Bruce Darnell

The room contains framed photos of letters he sent her; portraits of him, both hand-drawn and from photos; a curio cabinet with various memorabilia inside and a flag from his funeral on top; and a trunk that holds letters, name tags and a cassette with a voicemail he once left her.

From the trunk, Verlene pulled out a folder with photos of children who have been named after her son. A few are named Matthew, others Wyatt, some both. There are at least four kids named after him.

But outside of those that knew him personally or were named after him, she said recent generations may not remember him.

Matt was 21 when he died on Dec. 3, 2004. Many of the children named after him were born in the late-2000s or early-2010s. They know about him since their parents tell them his story when they get older.

But Verlene said others in Millstadt may not be aware of that story.

Who was Matthew Wyatt?

“He was very lighthearted ... Out of uniform, he didn’t have a serious bone in his body,” Verlene said. “But in uniform — it was like Jekyll and Hyde.”

In a Belleville News-Democrat article published on Dec. 6, 2004, Verlene said Matt loved Jim Carrey’s humor. While he never became an actor like Carrey, he definitely took some inspiration, considering most who knew him remember his “jokester” antics.

According to a Chicago Tribune article published shortly after Matt’s death, [Verlene said Matt](#) wanted to be an actor — and a musician and a professional football player, she later added — so he drove 90 minutes to Wilmington, N.C., to be an extra in “Dawson’s Creek.”

Matt’s father, Alan Wyatt, 68, said his scene “ended up on the editing room floor.”

[Alan and Matt’s stepmother](#), Lauren Wyatt, 57, spoke to WFMY News 2 in North Carolina in 2021 about some of Matt’s interests, mainly his involvement in Belleville West High School’s drama club and his love for sports and the St. Louis Cardinals.

A spokesperson for Bost said Lauren is a congressional fellow in Rep. Kathy Manning’s, D-N.C., office. She reached out to Bost to see if he would propose a bill to rename the Millstadt post office.

Alan was active in the Marine Corps for 22 years — he retired a few months after Matt died — and exposed Matt to the military world early in his life. In a recent interview, Alan said he didn’t know how much of an influence this had on Matt later joining the Marines, and said it was “a question only Matt could answer.”

While he was uncertain of his influence, Alan knew Matt didn’t plan to make the Marine Corps a career. He agreed with Verlene that he wasn’t school-oriented, and so he likely wouldn’t go to college once he left.

“As far as I know, his plan was to become a postman in Millstadt, driving around and delivering the mail,” he said. “I told him, ‘Son, whatever you want to do is fine, it’s your life. You made me proud just being who you are, and made me really proud when you joined the Marine Corps.’”

Ben Theis, Matt’s childhood friend, recounted a consistent bit he would do as they drove home from high school.

“He had a silver Grand Am with a system in the back,” Theis said. “There was a back road we’d take and he’d always speed up and try to ramp that damn car on a dip in the road.”



Ben Theis stands with his son, Wyatt, who is named after Matthew Wyatt, on July 25, 2024. Wyatt plays the drums, which Theis said is interesting because Matt Wyatt also played the drums in a band called "The Plaid Millies." Bruce Darnell

Theis also remembered how Matt would coerce people into listening to him play the drums. Matt kept his drum kit in the basement, and would suggest getting ice cream sandwiches from the basement's fridge, "Then, you'd have nowhere to go," he said.

Theis said nobody disliked Matt, and that he was the "the kind of friend I never had a bad day with."

The pair did everything together. They worked at the same McDonald's, practiced WWE moves on the trampoline, and played Marines together when they were kids.

Things changed when Matt went to Iraq.

They were going to go together, but Theis said his wife, then girlfriend, didn't want to have to travel the country, and so he entered the workforce while Matt went to the Marines.

"When he went, we didn't see each other every day anymore," Theis said. "He would go out partying when he'd come back to town ... I was getting married. That wasn't my thing anymore, you know?"

"I wish I spent more time partying with him, even though it wasn't my thing," he said. "You don't think, 'This is his last time home.'"

Theis is one of the handful of people who named their child after Matt. His son is named Wyatt. Likewise, Matt's friend Sarah Allen named her oldest son Wyatt — her youngest son's middle name is Matthew.



A collage of photos of Matthew Wyatt rests behind a photo of Matthew Ben Schriver on July 15, 2024. Schriver is one of the five or so children named after Matt, and his middle name is a reference to either Cpl. Binh Le, a Vietnamese-American soldier who died with Matt in Iraq, or Ben Theis, Matt's childhood friend. Bruce Darnell

Allen met Matt through mutual friends. She was fully introduced to Matt at a Super Bowl party in February 2001.

Not long after, they went to prom together, and Allen said they spent the summer doing “stupid teenager stuff ... I remember going to a lake, and he’s like, ‘Let’s swim across the lake.’ We did not make it across the lake, and I had to drag him halfway back.”

During the summer and for much of their relationship, the two were just friends. After Matt went to boot camp in July 2001, things started to change. Verlène paid for Allen’s trip to his boot camp graduation in October. She and Matt then boarded a plane leaving from San Diego.

“We had a conversation on the plane (back to Millstadt),” Allen said. “That’s when we decided we’d attempt to start dating.”

They only went on a few dates before Matt left for infantry training the next month. Allen was going to college in Edwardsville, and over time, they grew apart.

“Matt would call the house and I wouldn’t be there, and nobody would tell me he called,” she said. “There wasn’t a whole lot of contact around that time ... We lost touch around (either) the end of 2002 or 2003.”

Allen continued with college and later got married.

“When people go to college, they drift apart and move on in different directions. (I was in Edwardsville), he was stationed in North Carolina,” she said.

Eventually, Matt was no longer stationed in North Carolina. He got shipped out to prepare for Iraq.

Matt in Iraq

Matt left for Okinawa, Japan, before he was sent to Iraq. There, he met Sgt. Greg Iworsky, who said he and Matt would later “become inseparable.”

“We met about nine months before we deployed,” Iworsky said. “Our Battery, India, was relieved by Matt, who was in Tango. We met in the motor pool, hit it off, and became friends during the transition.

“I didn’t see Matt (again) until they returned in about June and he came over to Sierra Battery, the unit we would deploy to Iraq,” he said. “Once the Battery was assembled, they created squads. Matt was assigned to mine.”

They were deployed in September 2004. Matt was in Iraq for just three months. The rest of the platoon remained until about March 2005.

On Nov. 17, 2004, Matt wrote a letter to Verlene, saying, “The forward operating base has been my home for two months ... We were going to go to Fallujah to give artillery support while the assault was happening. But as you probably already know, the assault has happened, and I’m still in good ‘ol Trebil.”

Trebil is a town located on the border of Iraq and Jordan and is 306 miles away from Fallujah, which is outside of Baghdad, Iraq’s capital. The battle Matt is referring to started on Nov. 7, 2004.

Matt described their role as being a type of police force. “On patrols, we check the Iraqi’s IDs. If they belong here, they’re good, if not, we arrest them and turn them over to Iraqi police.”

He went on, “I’m also in a great squad. We got about 40 to 50 arrests, a high priority arrest, and four kills. In return, none of my squad has been wounded or killed. WE ROCK!”



Matthew Wyatt (center) sits on the lap of Sgt. Greg Iworsky in Trebil, Iraq, sometime in September 2004. Second from the right is Cpl. Binh Le, who, along with Matt, died in the bombing on Dec. 3, 2004. *Contributed by Matt Hetrick*

Matt was a team leader in the 1st Platoon, 5th Battalion, 10th Marines. Iworsky was a squad leader and in charge of Matt as well as a few other team leaders. The person in charge of Iworsky, and by extension, Matt, is also named Matt.

Matt Hetrick was the platoon sergeant, and he was with Matt for 10 to 11 months. Hetrick said Matt was a “pleasure to be around.”

“He led fearlessly,” he said. “He took care of his men and lifted people’s spirits. He made sure everyone was mentally focused and taken care of. His people would follow him anywhere.”

Iworsky said Matt knew when to turn off the jokes and get serious, and knew he could depend on him.

Hetrick and Iworsky said Trebil was very remote. It was on the only road into Jordan from Iraq. They had no internet and were far from military support. “20 minutes by air, two hours by ground ... We were all alone,” Hetrick said.

Hetrick said there had been a white truck that came through a few months prior to the bombing. It was driven by locals and was a part of the resupply convoy that came every 10 days; it carried water tanks. Hetrick said he “cut (the truck) out for security reasons.”

On the evening of Dec. 3, 2004, the platoon returned from an eight-hour patrol. “It was a beautiful day out,” Iworsky said. “It was about 80 degrees and there were no clouds.”

Hetrick said the Marines had just finished eating dinner when the white truck started barreling into the base. Iworsky was at a command post, and when he heard gunfire, he started running toward it.

Meanwhile, Hetrick was writing a daily report. He stepped outside, then the gunfire started.

“Next thing I know, I’m on the ground,” Hetrick said.

Iworsky saw a massive flash, then started hearing calls for “the Doc,” a nickname for Hospital Corpsman Ryan Deering.

“I ran to where it happened and could see a couple of Marines being worked on, but I couldn’t see who it was because it was dark,” Iworsky said.

Matt and Cpl. Binh Le, [a Vietnamese-born Marine from Alexandria, Virginia](#), had shot the truck driver. When they did, it slowed to a crawl and then exploded.



Parts from the white truck used in the suicide bombing in Trebil, Iraq litter the ground on Dec. 4, 2004. Matt Hetrick, the platoon sergeant, said the remnants of the wreckage lasted long after the bombing. *Contributed by Matt Hetrick*

It was an attack planned by al-Qaeda. Hetrick said there was going to be another bombing from inside Jordan, but “the bomber got scared after the first explosion. He took off, lost control of his vehicle, and crashed ... the Jordanians caught him.”

Hetrick said the explosion obliterated some of the base’s barriers — which were 6 feet by 6 feet square boxes filled with dirt and left out for months, “Very rugged,” he said. He grabbed his weapon and ran to the scene.

Hetrick saw Le fatally wounded on the ground. Iworsky tended to Le, who died soon after the bombing.

Matt was thrown into a wall from the explosion. Hetrick and Deering tended to him.

“He looked up at (Deering), who was a very good friend of his, and said, ‘Help me Doc, I don’t want to die,’ and you could tell he wouldn’t forget that for the rest of his life,” Hetrick said.

Matt died in Hetrick’s arms. He would have been 22 years old a week later.

“There were a number of different things he could have done that night,” Hetrick said. “But I guarantee that half of my platoon would be dead if he didn’t do what he did.”

Hetrick said he relives the event each night, and Iworsky said he always thinks about Matt.

The news reaches Millstadt

Verlene heard pounding on the door at around 10:30 p.m. She didn’t answer because she didn’t know who it was, and it was too late for unannounced guests.

“Matt’s dad (Alan Wyatt) called me and said, ‘The next knock on the door you get, you need to answer it,’” she said. “And so then I answered it.”

It was two military people in uniform. Behind them was a white van. Alan received

the same visit sometime prior.

Verlene said she was shaking from shock as they explained what happened, and then made her sign paperwork. “That’s really all,” she said. “Your emotions just kind of leave you.”

The next knocks would come from the media. She was inundated with requests for interviews.

“(Matt died) on a Friday,” she said. “By Monday, they were knocking on my door.

“Everybody wanted interviews and phone calls,” she said. “Old answering machines used to have little cassettes, and mine got busted because I had gotten so many phone calls.”

The news spread quickly. Soon, Matt’s death was being broadcast on television. Sarah Allen was in the middle of finals week, and said her dad tried to hide the news from her.

“They were all acting strange,” Allen said. “One of my friends called me and asked, ‘Did you see the news?’

“I almost got into a car wreck ... I was really upset, and I left my house to go to my final, ran a red light, and nearly got hit head on by a bus,” she said. She failed her finals that day and had to retake them.

Ben Theis proposed to his girlfriend on Dec. 2, 2004, the day before Matt’s death.

He got the news that Matt died a few days later, in the early morning. His dad came over to tell him.

“My heart sank,” Theis said. “I remember the town coming together. They did a parade, and the kids in school all made posters.

“I didn’t have a brother, so losing him is what I imagine it’s like to lose one,” he said.

Theis is among a group of people who got tattoos after Matt died. His says, “In loving memory,” and has Matt’s full name as well as the day he was born and died.



Ben Theis holds his shirt up to reveal his tattoo on July 25, 2024. Theis was Matthew Wyatt's childhood friend, and he got the tattoo after he died in December 2004. Bruce Darnell

Alan went to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware on Dec. 6, 2004, a few days after Matt died. He said that's where they bring military members after they've died overseas.

"We went to Baltimore, then flew to St. Louis," Alan said. "I met Verlene, other family members and the Marines there. A flag was draped over his coffin and he was loaded into a hearse."

The Missouri Highway Patrol escorted the hearse into Illinois, where the Illinois State Police would take over the escort to a Millstadt church.

"We laid him to rest on Dec. 10, 2004," Alan said. "Which would have been his 22nd birthday."

Almost exactly 19 and a half years later, on July 10, 2024, Bost proposed the bill that would rename Millstadt's post office after Matt if it is signed into law.

"It's been nearly 20 years since the world lost Matthew Wyatt, but his legacy burns bright ... It's been said that one of life's greatest gifts is to be remembered. Cpl. Matthew Wyatt, you are remembered. And that's never going to change," Bost said in his remarks on the House floor.

Everyone who talked about Matt approved of the renaming, and said it was important for his name to be honored and for his story to be told.

A visit to Matt's Grave

Matthew Wyatt is buried in Mount Evergreen Cemetery in Millstadt. He's on the far-right side, and has a flat tombstone.

Many of the graves have American flags — a likely sign the person was in the military — yet most of those were for participants in conflicts of the last century.

Still, some of the other graves are unique.

One grave had empty Bud Light cans stuffed into the dirt around it; a few had etched in their favorite activities — "Gone fishing in heaven," one said; and a grave from

1920, clearly made to list two people, had only one name carved out.

Amid periodic interruptions to the cemetery’s stillness by distant thunder and the construction of new homes in a nearby cul-de-sac, Matt’s grave appeared.

It was covered with freshly cut grass, and had flowers and a U.S. flag planted beside it. Verlene visits the grave to keep it tidied up. She’ll sometimes bring Matt “a third of a bacon cheeseburger, seven fries, and a cigarette.”

None of that was there this time. Just his name and honorifics beneath: “Bronze Star Medal,” “Purple Heart,” and “Beloved Son.”



Matthew Wyatt’s grave in Millstadt’s Mt. Evergreen Cemetery on July 23, 2024. Bruce Darnell

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Bruce A. Darnell *Belleville News-Democrat* 