

I love you Brian

By Roxana von Kraus

January 17, 2003 California

Thousands of Marines have left San Diego today, for the “possible” war in Iraq. My son is one of them. A first lieutenant in the 1st Marine Division. He is twenty-four years old and has thirty-four Marines under his command. In his Thanksgiving prayer, he wishes that his men would be next to him.

It was only last month that I flew to California to meet them all, returning from their first deployment in the Gulf, through Yemen, Kuwait, Djibouti and East Timor. I rented a red convertible and drove to the beach where the helicopters were assisting the debarkation for Camp Pendleton. I felt like in the movies, overwhelmed with awe, pride, and happiness – that I am part of this country, that my son is a US Marine. He is an immigrant’s son, who chose to serve because “this country did so much for us, we have to pay back.” He was born in New Jersey, the first American in the family – if anybody had to pay it was us not him.

In the evening I take the Marines out to dinner at San Clemente’s Pier .These men and women are the best this land has, bright, honest, fearless and of supreme loyalty towards their country and each other. The Marines are all One, irrespective of rank, religion or color. And for a moment I am part of their world. There are so many questions that I would like to ask but I do not know how much they can tell me. Or how much I really want to know.

I don’t do well with deployments, I cannot control my fear, and I move like in a dream, My heart is so heavy, that I cannot walk straight. All thoughts are broken; the telephone calls do not make much sense, and the emails go unanswered. I find myself crying in the subway, at the gym, and office meetings. I wish I were asleep and arise only when the terror is over. I set a up a small prayer table with an old silver icon, pictures of my boys swimming in the Galapagos, childhood snapshots from New Jersey, and a cross from Santa Katerina monastery.

Old memories to bless the new ones.

The Marines say they are not afraid, they are well trained and they are ready.

I am sure they are, but I am not.

March 18, 2003

The war finds me in Siem Riep Cambodia where I lead a group of American tourists. We tour the Angkor Wat temples in the morning to return at noon to the hotel. The concierge, in an impeccable white starched jacket, whispers in a timid under tone “the madness has started.” And in a blink of an eye, my world stops in that hotel lobby.

All night BBC broadcasts live scenes from the war - bombardments looking like video games that make you forget the life underneath, soldiers and Marines running, shooting in an unknown

desert, so very close to me geographically and still so formidably remote. I lie on the floor in front of the TV refusing to fall asleep, for fear of losing control, of failing to support my son and his Marines...

Three months later, I receive a brown patch of carton, ripped from a Ready to Eat Meal box – no stamps – just my name and address:

March 18, 3 am Kuwait

We're going. I'm ok. See you soon. Love, Brian

Back in United States I find a country hardly aware that “we are a nation at war.” The restaurants are full, dinners hold elaborate conversations declaring the Iraqi issue “over and done with.” CNN broadcasts live reports from “embedded” journalists and New York Times keeps a daily record of names and numbers of the fallen. The morning shows broadcast news as usual while a flash line underneath announces death in Fallujah, Ramadi, and Anbar, helicopters failures, sniper attacks. and troops ambushed with IEDs, detonated by cell phones.

My prayers become songs without words. Given in silence, for his safety, their safety. I no longer answer the phone till a friend notes “the Marines do not call. They come to your door, instead.” So now I look from afar for any unknown cars parked in front of the house. After each flash line announcing death you wait for a day, then two and when nobody comes you can breathe again. But such happiness is always followed by shame and guilt. Guilty to be relieved and ashamed to rejoice while other families do not.

The New York Times lists one name, but there are so many others - mothers and fathers, wives, sisters, brothers, children, whose life was changed forever by that call from Iraq.

Mothers deal with fear in their own way. Some read Harry Potter, others volunteer, bake, travel or run marathons. I write, and play chess. And we all send care packages, with motorcycle gloves flexible enough to guard against the desert cold while holding a gun. Flack jackets, Patagonia socks, chocolate chips cookies and beef jerky, banana breads and comic books. This entire mailing frenzy takes place like an underground movement of the fighters' families who listen in amazement to Mr. Rumsfeld's Senate briefing “that we fight with the army we have, and not the one we wish we had.”

Nobody marches, protests, writes letters, poems, or pamphlets. We are the parents of the “willing”, those idealistic young men and women, who volunteered to fight for our country, to preserve the few liberties left to us, in between airport body scans and telephone recordings.

I thought of joining a peace walk in Washington, once. Not to offend my son or endanger his mission I asked if this would be acceptable. His answer was typical for an American Marine: “Mama, I've made my choice. You make yours!”

July 18, 2011

Many years have passed since that day of March 2003. CNN moved the news from Iraq to the Middle East. We are all tired of unemployment, foreclosures, financial crisis, and political discontent. But still inexplicably interested in “reality” shows and staged “survival” games. And our wars are still fought, on the other side of time. In Washington, Mr. Obama reports the withdrawal of the American soldiers to be replaced by Navy Seals and MARSOC, Marine Special Forces. And, my son is leaving for Afghanistan, this month.

On my birthday.