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Father hopes fallen Marine's heroism will inspire others

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This story should not be about Gary Stokes. If he could write it, the story would begin and end with his son Sean, a strapping 24-year-old Marine killed in battle last July in Iraq's Anbar province.

It should be about the Silver Star that the younger Stokes is to receive posthumously Wednesday – on what would have been his 25th birthday.

Or the three Purple Hearts he earned while escaping death and fighting shoulder to shoulder with his brothers in arms.

"The story is not about me," the elder Stokes insists.

Yet, it has to be.

This is a story about a father trying to keep the



Courtesy of Gary Stokes

Sean Andrew Stokes of Auburn, killed last July in Iraq, will be posthumously awarded the Silver Star.

memory of his son alive.

"I just couldn't stand that my awesome son was killed, because that's not the end of the story. No, it's not," he says. "This is about honoring my son."

So Gary Stokes, 52, an Auburn businessman,

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transformed his anger and grief into a mission to “do something good in my son’s name.”

He created a foundation – the Sean Andrew Stokes Memorial Organization – to help other grieving families.

He talks about enlisting communities to help honor the fallen – perhaps by dedicating park benches and public art.

Stokes tells the story to whom ever will listen – to neighbors, friends and politicians who need to know, he says, about the service and the life his son gave to his country.

On July 30, Sean Stokes was killed by a homemade bomb while serving with the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment in western Iraq. He was on his third tour after enlisting in the Marines after graduating from Bear River High School.

He enlisted in the Marines with patriotic fervor after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq.

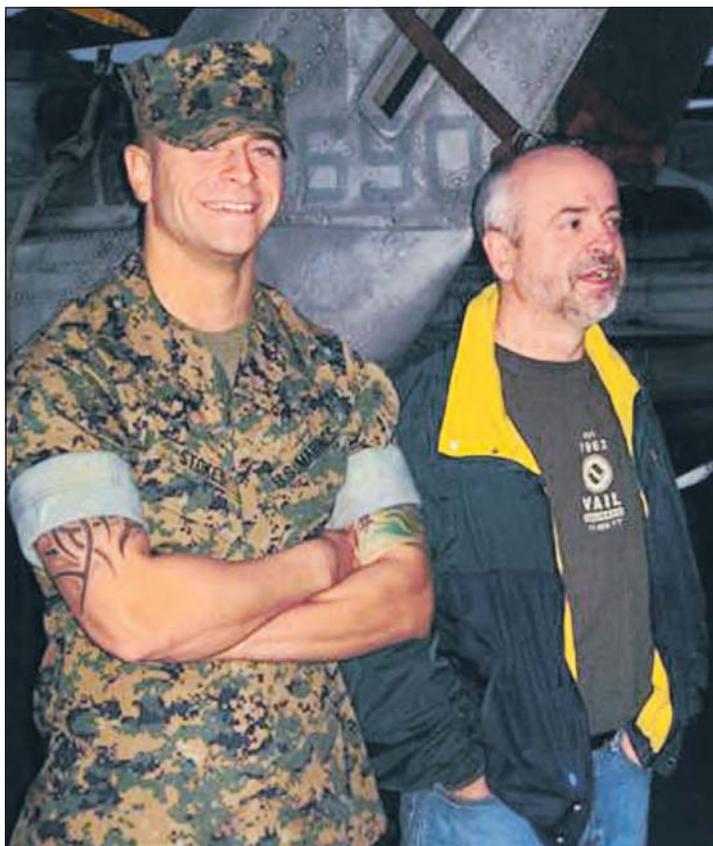
In 2004, Sean Stokes was sent to war.

During a mission in Fallujah, an embedded writer took notice of the rifleman from Auburn.

The writer, Patrick O’Donnell, wrote about Stokes and his Lima Company in the book “We Were One,” an account of some of the most harrowing battles in Fallujah.

Stokes also was featured in a History Channel program about those battles.

His company went door to door in search of insurgents, with Sean Stokes often leading the way, kicking in doors and



Above, Sean Stokes, left, visited in San Diego with his father, Gary Stokes, of Auburn, before the young Marine left again for Iraq in April 2007. At left, Sean Stokes with his fiancée, Nicole Besier. Stokes earned three Purple Hearts for injuries sustained in battle and was a fearless leader, according to various reports.

Courtesy of Gary Stokes

putting himself in the line of fire.

The Silver Star is the military’s third-highest medal for valor. At least 75 Marines, including Stokes, have earned the medal during the Iraq war – 14 of them from heroics in Fallujah in November and December 2004, according to Sgt. Michael Lowry, a Camp Pendleton spokesman.

“He never received any recognition for what he did in Fallujah,” said O’Donnell, the author

who nominated Stokes for the medal. “He totally deserves it.”

The medal was to have been awarded long ago – before Sean Stokes died. Why it wasn’t done earlier isn’t entirely clear.

Had he lived, the father said, Sean Stokes probably would have declined the medal. “He said he didn’t deserve it. He said if he got it, it would be for everybody” in his company, the elder Stokes said.

The posthumous medal ceremony will take place Wednesday

morning at Camp Pendleton near Oceanside, north of San Diego.

The Silver Star cites Stokes for his gallantry. It honors him for being “fearless in the face of danger.”

During nine days of fighting, Stokes, then a private, was his unit’s point man, often the first to take enemy fire. One day, a grenade exploded beneath him as he cleared a small house, severely wounding him. Injured, he pushed on with his mission, clearing the house of the insurgents with his rifle.

“It would have scared me to death,” said Gary Stokes, who remembers his son as the little boy who loved to fish.

After his son’s first enlistment, Gary Stokes urged him not to return. “I didn’t want him to go back,” the elder Stokes said. “There was no talking him out of it. I told him, ‘Look, you’ve done more than enough. Come back and have a long life.’ ”

In Iraq, his son was in his element, the elder Stokes said. “He just felt his calling.”

In his son’s death, the father found his own calling.

“Look, my son was killed. I decided I needed a mission. I didn’t want to just grieve and do nothing. I couldn’t have his legacy just die. That’s him dying all over again.”

His mission is full of ambition, even if thus far there has been little to show for it. The effort, which has helped a handful of families, is nonpolitical. His intent is to honor the memory of all Iraq war heroes.

Stokes’ Web site for his son, www.sasmemorial.org, gives surviving families a chance to honor loved ones killed in war.

It takes money, he says, to help more.

“I don’t want anybody to forget my son,” Stokes said. “He’s not going to go away.”

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