

National Guardsman raised in a three-Gold Star family named Soldier of the Year

For Jake Evans, the Soldier of the Year contests were a chance to live up to his family's legacy.

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Jake Evans broke the news to his family that he was going to enlist — and broke down crying as he did — at DJ's Diner & Drive-in, the local pizza place in Eureka, Nevada.

It was 2019 and DJ's was both a place to eat and a social hub for most of the 480 residents of Eureka. Jake's dad, Jeff Evans, was the principal of the town's high school, which meant he was well known among both the adults who came to DJ's for dinner and among the teenagers who cruised their pickups in and out of the diner's gravel parking lot off Route 50, the town's central drag that Life Magazine, after a visit, once called "the loneliest road in America."

Jake was in town before his final year at the University of Nevada-Reno. Between classes, he'd been working as a local EMT and soon realized that many in Reno's first responder world — ambulance paramedics, firefighters, even some police — were also medics in the local National Guard unit, the 238th Aviation Regiment.

The 238th had a storied history as a 'Dustoff' medevac unit in Iraq. In a 2009 deployment, its patients saw a survival rate two-thirds above average after the 238th began flying with advanced, critical care-trained medics — many of whom were now Jake's coworkers.

And Jake had decided to join them. After graduation, he planned to enlist as a "68-Whiskey" or combat medic, get his paramedic license during training, and, eventually, fly as a critical care flight medic.

But first, he had to tell his family.

As the local teenagers laughed and flirted in the parking lot outside, Jake finally worked up the nerve to tell his parents.

Or at least he thought he did.

"I just started crying," Jake said. "I was just a mess."

Jeff remembers Jake struggling to say the words.

“He told us this is where his heart is and he wants to continue with our family’s tradition of serving,” Jeff said.

Our family’s tradition of serving.

That’s what made joining the military different for Jake Evans — and his parents — than most recruits. Across three generations, soldiers from the Evans family had earned a legacy that, if not unique, stands out as extraordinary in Army history. Three men who were or would become part of the Evans family fought in World War II — and two again in Korea — and came home safely. But in the generations that followed, three more soldiers in the family — brothers, fathers, and uncles — went to war with the same bravery as their elders, but not the same luck.

Two Evans brothers — Jeff’s father and uncle — were killed in Vietnam, putting them among the small handful of brothers killed in the war.

A generation later, in 2011, Dave Evans — Jeff’s brother and Jake’s uncle — died of combat wounds suffered in an IED attack in Iraq.

When Jake announced over pizza at DJ’s that he planned to be the next Evans in uniform, Jeff struggled to process it.

“As a dad you’re proud as hell,” Jeff told Task & Purpose. “But my family track record of coming home from war, it isn’t that good. You’re scared as hell.”

When Jake started crying, the whole table — Jeff, Jake’s mom Dena and his brother Austin — did too. Jeff looked around, before deciding to say something: “I realized I knew everybody there and I said, ‘let’s talk at home so nobody thinks something is wrong.’”

SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

In April, Jake — now in his third year as a combat medic with the 238th — was named the Nevada National Guard’s Soldier of the Year. In early May, he traveled to Hawaii to compete in the regional level of the Army’s Best Warrior Competition, a contest which eventually selects the Army-wide Soldier of the Year.

If Jake’s career in uniform has come a long way since that night at DJ’s diner, so has the family’s view of it. Jeff says he now takes pride in his son’s Army achievements, though the reality behind the job occasionally seeps in.

“In the time since, it’s just become, like ‘that’s just Jake’s job,’” Jeff said. “But then you get uprisings in the world, and you think maybe there might be a deployment, then it starts coming back to you again. That’s a reality.”

Now retired after a near-four-decade career in education, Jeff attends veterans events, even speaking at some and riding with Nevada’s Honor Flight. It’s a different world, he says, from the Vietnam era.

“I don’t think anybody knew what ‘Gold Star’ was until several years into Iraq when lots of kids were losing parents,” Jeff said. “I didn’t know what my title was until who knows when in my life.”

Jeff's grandfather, James Evans, fought in World War II and Korea. In the years between the conflicts, he and his wife, Juanita, started a family in Klamath Falls. The couple had four boys, including Norman Francis in 1947 and David Lynn in 1948.

At 19, David was a gunner with the 117th Assault Helicopter Company in Long An province, Vietnam. He was manning a machine gun in October 1968 when his helicopter crashed. The impact wasn't fatal, but enemy forces were nearby and closing in. In the years since, Jeff says, he's met several men who were on the helicopter. They told him David would not leave the crash site, laying down cover fire as the other survivors ran for a nearby treeline, where they eventually evaded back to US lines.

"They said they made it to the jungle only because David stayed on that gun," Jeff said.

Two years later in 1970, Norman Evans was a 23-year-old SP6 — the equivalent of a Staff Sergeant today — assigned to a shadowy intelligence unit, the 156th Aviation Company. The 156th was a flying unit in the secretive Army Security Agency. Tasked with some of the most secret programs of the war, the ASA operated hidden listening posts and slow-moving spy planes, combing the air for enemy radio signals.

At home in Klamath Falls, Norman's wife, Lana, looked after their two boys. The couple had met in grade school. By the time Norman left for Vietnam, their family included Jeff, then 2, and David Lynn, who Norman named after his younger brother killed two years before.

On November 24, 1970 — Thanksgiving weekend — Norman's spy plane was returning from a mission when it collided with a Vietnamese helicopter, killing all four Americans on the plane and 12 Vietnamese Marines.

In the years since, Jeff has met veterans who served with Norman. Uniformly, he said, they refuse to discuss their missions but regale him with stories about his father.

"I have no memories of him other than what my mom and others have told me," he said. "But I've met soldiers that served with him, so I know his favorite beer, and what kind of jokes he liked to tell."

Norman Evans' beer, Jeff says, was a brew called Lucky. And his jokes, he said, were "just as off-color as the ones I tell."

"They were great soldiers and hard workers," Jeff said. "They were one of four [sets of] brothers killed from Oregon."

BROTHERS IN ARMS

It's hard to pin down exactly how many sets of brothers died in Vietnam.

Jeff says it was 39. The National Park Service — which oversees the Vietnam Memorial Wall — links to a database of names on a website run by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation. That website pegs sets of brothers listed on the wall at 31.

Another website, thewall-usa.com, specifically lists by name and date of death 40 pairs of brothers recorded as killed in Vietnam, plus a set of step-brothers who were raised together, California's Richard Earl Sipes and Raymond Omer Kincannon.

Missing from all official lists of Vietnam deaths are the Page brothers, Kelly, Gary, and Gregory, Nebraska-born sailors who died together when their Navy destroyer was struck by another ship and sank in the South China Sea in 1969.

But even with two brothers lost in a family, Jeff says, there was not a well-developed system of help or charity for Lana back home.

"The only support she ever received was from some soldiers who were close to the family," Jeff said. "As far as government assistance, I honestly don't know if that was in existence. There was a small monetary amount I know widows received."

After initially moving in with her parents, Lana went on to remarry and Jeff grew up with little context of his father's death.

"You're just so engrossed in life as a kid. For me it was hunting and fishing and three sports a year," he said. "We had a Vietnamese kid in 5th or 6th grade. He and I were friends. I don't know what thoughts I was thinking, but 'my dad helped you get here.'"

As the next generation of Evans hit adulthood, Jeff's brother David — who went by Dave — was inspired to join by the 9/11 attacks, enlisting in 2003.

In Iraq in 2009, Dave survived a series of IED attacks, one a close call that left him with scars on his face, the second a direct hit that ruined his back.

Returning home, he fought chronic pain and PTSD for two years, Jeff said, before dying at 41 in Corvallis, Oregon.

The Vietnam deaths of the Evans brothers had passed without major public notice in the late 1960s and early 70s. Not so with Dave's death. In 2017, state officials dedicated stretches of Oregon highway to all three Evans soldiers.

Jeff brought Austin and Jake to the ceremony. The moment left a strong impression on middle-school-aged Jake.

"My uncle dying and the funeral, I guess it gave me a purpose," Jake said. "It was nothing direct when he passed away, but it was part of our family legacy of how my dad raised us, that we're a free country and to fight for what you believe in. And seeing that he was raised not really knowing his dad."

In high school in Minden, Nevada, Jake played four sports — he was on a track relay team that set a record that still stands at Douglas High — and stayed away from his dad's office. Jeff was both the school's athletic director and dean "I handled all the discipline cases," he said.

Jeff took particular interest in the school's 'hard cases,' the kids who couldn't stay out of trouble and whose teachers couldn't figure out why.

“I could talk to the kids who were struggling with losing parents, losing siblings,” Jeff said. “With my unfortunate experience, I’ve been able to use that to help people going through the same thing.”

He also wrote letters of recommendation for kids applying to service academies, talked to others considering the military about his family’s legacy and patriotism, and, when he heard that former students were deployed, sent care packages.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dragged on, Jake remembers his dad setting an example of quiet patriotism

“He’d always make a point to, not preach, but make it well known that we’re grateful to live in this country because of those who died for it,” Jake said. “He was never too outright but always super patriotic. He would always tell you why you should be grateful to live in our country.”

This February, Jake won his unit’s battalion-level contest for soldier of the year, then won the Guard’s state-wide event in April. He took first in both a timed ruck march and a fitness test, along with coasting through the medical events.

To prepare for the Region VII Best Warrior Competition on Oahu, Hawaii, he asked a friend just back from Special Forces training to work with him on land navigation, weapons, and other nuts-and-bolts infantry skills. He also studied the nearly 400 pages of manuals and study guides on which the soldiers would be tested.

After four days of events — from obstacle course to shooting events to call-for-fire practice — neither Jake nor his Nevada Guard NCO teammate, Staff Sgt. Alec Canepa-Teal advanced to the national contest.

Probably just as well. At the end of May, Jake ships out to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio for his final critical care medical training, one of the last steps towards full duty status with the 238th.

Jake also works as a Paramedic in Reno, surrounded by his fellow Guard medics and supervisors.

“We see each other on a daily basis, whether on the ambulance or in the hospitals,” he said. “If I mess up on a call, my sergeant is gonna hear about it.”

Jeff retired from the Eureka school system last June and now, he says, plans to volunteer with veteran and Gold Star organizations. He’s ridden with Nevada’s Honor to veteran funerals and recorded a song about his family, “Say Hi To Dad For Me.” The title was the final goodbye he spoke to his brother at his funeral.

“I honestly, firmly believe that everything happens for a reason,” Jeff said. “If my dad had not been killed, I wouldn’t have my boys today.”

For Jake, the Soldier of the Year contests were a chance to live up to his family’s legacy.

“They died being warriors,” he said. “I know it runs in the blood and I want to prove that and make them proud.”