

Presented By The Wisconsin American Legion Foundation's
Celebration of Freedom

STORIES OF HONOR

Stories of risk, sacrifice, duty and honor.

Joseph James Altmann found his passion working as a medic in the U.S. Army. The Marshfield native graduated from Columbus High School in 2003 and chose to take a few college classes with the goal of obtaining an associate's degree. But the call to serve in the U.S. military was always in

the back of his mind, until he finally decided to enlist in the Army. It was April, 2005.

Altmann began his time in the military with basic training in Fort Leonard Wood, surrounded by the Ozarks in Missouri. He was then sent to Fort Sam Houston Military Base in San Antonio, Texas, where he trained to become a medic. Not too long after, Joe Altmann and his regiment were sent to Germany, and then on to Iraq. He was stationed there from 2006-2007.

After serving one tour, he was sent back to the U.S. where he was stationed at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland and later to the Schofield Barracks in Honolulu. There, he was attached to the 27th Infantry Division, arriving there in June of 2008. In 2009, he began a second tour in Iraq.

Jan Altmann said although she was happy her son was safe stateside at the medical center, it proved frustrating for her son.

"He couldn't treat anyone because some of the patients are civilians," Jan Altmann said. "On the battle field he could do whatever he needed to save a life, and he did. He was truly a combat medic. Those were his men and he was there for them."

From Hawaii, Altmann was deployed in the Spring of 2011 for the third — and final time — to Afghanistan.

Fast forward to Christmas day, 2011. Altmann had been home for two weeks with his family around Thanksgiving. The family celebrated Thanksgiving, Christmas and Altmann's birthday, which fell on Dec. 15.

"On Christmas we typically get together with family," said Jan Altmann. "We went to mass at 7 a.m., had breakfast with one side of the family, dinner with our grown children and then spent a quiet night watching the Packers play."

About halfway through the game, Jan Altmann decided to turn in for the night. "I was

"Then I heard the doorbell ring; it was

in the bedroom getting ready for bed," Jan Altmann stated. "That's when Joe's father John Altmann, answered the door. He started calling for Jan.

"He was calling my name repeatedly and I didn't understand what the issue at the door was," Jan Altmann said. "I thought to myself, just answer it."

She soon learned why: Two uniformed military officers were in her doorway and things quickly went bad. The Altmanns learned their son died in the line of duty on Christmas day.

Earlier in the Spring of 2011, Joe Altmann was deployed for the third and final time to Afghanistan. By now, Joe had the experience and qualifications to be a senior line medic, where he got the unofficial title of "Doc." This offered him the ability to train the newest medics sent to the unit. He took great pride in this and was respected for his ability and expertise in the battlefield.

"We were usually able to keep in touch with Joe through computer messaging," Jan Altmann said. "He informed us that as senior line medic, he would have Christmas "off" and would be able to catch up with us that day. However, on December 24 we received a note that there were two medics who were ill and no one else to cover. Joe volunteered to go out on a mission that day."

It was the last note the Altmann's received from their son.

In the days following their son's death, the events leading up to Joe Altmann's death came out. Altmann and his regiment were stationed at checkpoint 2.5, in Kunar in eastern Afghanistan by the border of Pakistan. It was notorious for always being under attack with small arms fire. It was the sort of bunker where the soldiers only left to patrol or use the latrine.

When they came under fire an insurgent attack, Altmann was hit by a ricochet bullet.

"Being the medic, nobody knew where the medic kit was. So they had to make calls back and forth to the base, find the bag and ask how to stabilize him," Jan Altmann said. "His friends worked like mad to stabilize him. And they did. They got him out of there. But then he passed away (at the base) shortly after that."

Joseph Altmann served with the 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division of Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. He was just 27 years old when he died.

The Altmanns were allowed to fly to Dover Airforce Base to see their son return home to the United States. A military funeral followed back home in Marshfield, and subsequently a memorial service was held in Honolulu. While the loss of her son was difficult on their family, Altmann said she knows the loss is greatest for the military family.

"When that tour was finished, the number of soldiers lost was staggering," Jan Altmann said. "As a family we lost one and that has been difficult for us to deal with. However, we spoke with so many of Joe's company who lost many brothers during that tour."

Following the death of her son, Jan Altmann said the Army was amazing throughout their ordeal and helped them with the logistics of the funeral, giving the family time to focus on grieving.

"It was a whirlwind," Jan Altmann said. "The military really holds your hand through everything."

While the loss of her son was difficult on their family, Altmann said her son's regiment lost many more.

"In that tour when it was finished, the number of soldiers lost was staggering," Jan Altmann said. "A couple hundred others were lost in battle. Joe's buddies lost many. They were struggling the hardest."

Altmann said she found a little comfort in hearing about her son from his friends.

"There were some crazy stories Joe didn't relay to us," Jan Altmann said. "But they said he was a good leader. Quiet. That he loved doing his job and that he did it well."

Posthumously, Joseph James Altmann was promoted to staff sergeant.

Since his death, the Altmann's got involved with TAPS, Tragedy Assistance for Survivors. Each year they have a national seminar in Washington, D.C. and also hold local and regional events for veterans. TAPS also publishes a quarterly newsletter with information to help service men and woman and their families. "Whether it is one year out from your incident or 10, that grief never goes away," Altmann said. "It changes."

They have also found support in the Marshfield American Legion, a group that keeps in touch with military families in the communities they serve. And Altmann said she is also a member of the American Gold Star Mothers group.

In 2013 the Altmann family created what has become an annual 5K run fundraiser on Armed Forces Day in May; the proceeds stay in the community to help with local projects and organizations.

When her friends come to her for advice upon hearing their son or daughter wants to serve, Altmann said she's honest.

"You can't tell them they can't do something just because of the fear of what could happen," Altmann said. "How can you tell them not to do something they want to do? We've had too many friends who have lost children to other issues; disease or accidents, and you can't prepare for that. There's nothing you can do. It gives you the understanding you can't take anything for granted. Tomorrow is not a given."



Marshfield resident and U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Joseph James Altmann is pictured here in this undated photo. Altmann died on Christmas day, 2011, after his unit was attacked in Afghanistan.



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This photo of U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Joe Altmann hangs on the wall of the American Legion Post 54 in Marshfield. Altmann served as a medic with the 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division of Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. He was just 27 years old when he died.

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