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SACRED PATH

For those who take on the demanding 28-mile March for the Fallen in Pennsylvania, each stride honors the memory of a special sacrifice

WRITTEN BY MARK SETTLE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JORDAN BUSH

THREE MILES WEST OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL IN FORT INDIANTOWN GAP, PA, there is a sacred path. Twenty-eight miles long, it stretches along two adjacent ridges and crosses the valley between them. In September, when the dense, heavy hills show the first, light touch of autumn and the valley turns gold with late wildflower, the people come. But not for beauty. They come to remember.

Pennsylvania's annual March for the Fallen is almost otherworldly at times. The stories about what happens here each year speak on a different plane, dissolving physical and emotional boundaries. A wounded Veteran carries a 28-pound memorial stone all 28 miles, finishing in the dark of night. A woman with one leg attempts the arduous route on crutches but is taken off the course at mile 16. Her hands are drenched in blood. She returns the next year and completes the entire course.

This is the Path to Honor. Hosted and organized by the Pennsylvania National Guard, with its 18-mile companion route, Hawk Watch, the 28-mile march is a place where Soldiers, Veterans, families, friends and others in the community remember those who have sacrificed everything. Though grueling, the March for the Fallen is not a competition. In fact, participants are not certain to finish. The full route is more than double an average 12-mile ruck march. And the terrain is not gentle. But the



Left: Carmelo surveys the faces of the Pennsylvania Guard's 39 KIA displayed on the Wall of Honor at Strickler Field. Each mile of the march is marked by a photo of one of these fallen Soldiers. **Below:** Roy Edmundson (left) marches each year in honor of his son, SPC Chad Edmundson, who was killed in Iraq by an IED on May 27, 2009. Carmelo served at Edmundson's military funeral.



path is a place of memory. Every mile, a picture is posted of one of Pennsylvania's 39 Soldiers killed in action since 9/11. To take the Path to Honor is to bear a standard for the fallen.

Two weeks before this year's march, a Veteran stood before a room of Soldiers at the 56th Stryker Brigade dining-out. The speaker was Staff Sergeant Earl Granville, a wounded Veteran who lost his leg to an improvised explosive device (IED) in Afghanistan in June 2008. After he returned home, Granville lost his twin brother Joseph, a fellow Soldier, to suicide. But in the face of loss, Granville took an incredible route: He completed the March for the Fallen two straight years. And each time, he bore "the keystone"—a 28-pound memorial plate made of steel and shaped like the 28th Infantry Division insignia, from which it takes its name. Engraved on it are the names of Pennsylvania's fallen. Unable to attend the march this year, Granville made a challenge to the room: Who would bear the keystone and take the Path to Honor?

A Soldier stepped forward and took the keystone—Officer Candidate John Carmelo, who has a unique bond with the fallen. After joining the Guard in 2008, he worked full time for three years conducting military funerals. For many of the Soldiers with names engraved on the keystone, Carmelo rendered the final honors.

"I started to see names that I knew, names of people whose family I presented flags to," Carmelo says. "And I can remember going to these services."

Carmelo is familiar with the dangers of combat. In 2010–11, as a combat engineer, he deployed with the 228th Engineer Company to Iraq and conducted route

clearance operations in Baghdad and Anbar province. On Sept. 13, 2010, his vehicle was struck by an explosively formed penetrator (EFP). Describing that event, Carmelo reflects, "You don't know if you're going to live through it or if you're going to die. I was very fortunate."

Sadly, he knew many Soldiers who were not as for-

fortunate, including some at home—through another form of loss. On Oct. 11, 2014, after returning to Pennsylvania, he received a call that Sergeant First Class Corey Rogers—the man who had trained him on how to perform military funerals—had taken his own life. Dutifully, Carmelo rendered the final honors for his friend.

Speaking about the fallen, Carmelo brushes his hand across

the names on the keystone. His clear blue eyes bristle with emotion. "There are a lot of names on here," he says.

Approaching 8 a.m., the morning of the march is dark and cool, tinged with gray light. A slight wind wisps about with traces of rain—perfect weather for a march. At the start point on Strickler Field in Fort Indiantown Gap, hundreds of marchers huddle in groups. Military members are not the only marchers. This community is both vast and diverse.

Carmelo arrives and waits with his four fellow marchers. The keystone is strapped across his chest. The names are visible. "I didn't want it thrown in a rucksack, like a barbell," he says softly.

Of Carmelo's four companions, three are also officer candidates from the Pennsylvania National Guard: Steven Nusca, Rob Allsop and Tara McConnell. The fourth is Carmelo's civilian wife, Cindy. They stand off to the side, relaxed but private. Carmelo is the quietest of the group but smiles often.

After the national anthem plays, Brigadier General Tony Carrelli, the Pennsylvania adjutant general, delivers opening remarks. Then the march begins. Participants crowd through the red arch at the starting point, where a red marker posts the first picture of a fallen hero. The caption reads: "SFC Brent Allen Adams, 1DEC2005 – Iraq (OIF)."

Marchers pour out onto the paved road by the hundreds. Joggers pass by in shorts. A man with a shaved head is wearing an armored vest. The rain-sprinkled crowd surges forward. The mood is good. McConnell, Allsop and Nusca talk and laugh about OCS smoke sessions. Carmelo walks with his wife, smiles and comments. But he is setting the pace.

"We need to pick it up," he says.

Reaching mile marker 2, the marchers are surrounded by dense, green woods. Early on, the roads are full of people passing by, falling back and surging forward again. Lori Swartz introduces herself on the road. She lost her nephew, Specialist Chad A. Edmundson, on May 27, 2009, in Iraq. Each year, she comes here with her brother Roy, Edmundson's father, to memorialize his passing. She has never completed the course but tries to go farther each year.



OC John Carmelo (above and left) conducted military funerals for three years and knew he was meant to carry the 28-pound "keystone" for the march. The names of Pennsylvania's KIA are engraved on the reverse side.

She surveys all the Soldiers around her and says, “These are our heroes—not those people in Hollywood or the NFL. These Soldiers give everything to this country. Even when people turn their back on them, they just keep on going.”

Carmelo’s group moves ahead. From miles 3 to 5, the path pushes through the forest and breaks into the valley. Groups along the path begin to spread out. The distant voice of a friend shouts at McConnell from high ground. She calls back, rolls her eyes with a gruff chuckle and shifts her gaze back to the road.

Between mile markers 6 and 8, the road gets rougher. The path’s long pale line snakes its way up from the valley to a slope entering the forested ridgeline. This is the first ascension, a stretch that event organizers call “the first gut check.” Some marchers pause. Others increase the pace. McConnell pushes hard ahead, but Carmelo’s eyes scan. With firm but silent gestures, he encourages the group forward. One moment, he winces—then erases all evidence of pain from his face. The crest is just ahead.

Atop Hawk Watch, the path’s highest point, two silhouettes approach. A man and woman in their early 60s reach the summit in the light of midday. The man’s T-shirt has an emblem of an Apache helicopter with the text “Gun 23 Project.” The woman is by his side. Both wear black memorial bracelets. Charles and Diane Ruffner are here to honor their fallen son, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Matthew Ruffner.

“He was an Apache pilot, an instructor. Coming up in high school, he was a top-notch athlete,” Charles says. “He had some offers to play baseball, but he chose the military.”

Matthew, a motivational leader who brought people together, dreamed of flying and achieved that dream in the Guard. He fought for his country—and sacrificed job opportunities to serve. When his helicopter crashed during a reconnaissance mission in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, on April 9, 2013, Matthew and his co-pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jarett Yoder, were both killed.

“If [Matthew’s] wingman had gone down, he would be out here,” Charles says. “The small sacrifice that we make is nothing compared to what Matt sacrificed.”

Diane adds, “It’s nice that they do this. We lost a lot of guys.”

The Ruffners look out over the wide view of the valley, then walk south back down the trail. Carmelo’s team pushes west across the ridgeline to a punishing part of the trail. Entering this stretch, the tall and lean Carmelo offers the keystone to the muscular Nusca. Carmelo places it across Nusca’s chest and buckles it tight—they will all have a chance to bear the names.

At mile 10, the trail’s footing seriously deteriorates. Descending one steep spur, Carmelo’s team can see the next spur rise just as prominently—an intimidating spec-

“THESE ARE OUR HEROES—NOT THOSE PEOPLE IN HOLLYWOOD OR THE NFL. THESE SOLDIERS GIVE EVERYTHING TO THIS COUNTRY.”

—Lori Swartz, aunt of a fallen Soldier, SPC Chad A. Edmundson



tacle. For miles, the path goes like this until it turns back down into the valley around mile 14. A realization follows—there is a second ridge ahead and another 14 miles.

Mile 16. Lisa Hemmingway was picked up here with bloody, blistered hands two years ago. She marched on crutches, because she’d lost a leg after her body rejected a knee replacement. But that didn’t deter her from marching. Last year, she finished the course in just under 14 hours. As a civilian with family members in the military, she knows this community’s sacrifice. This year, she is out encouraging marchers.

“You hear on the news all the time about somebody lost in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan, but there’s no face to that name,” she says. “You come here, and there’s a face.”



Clockwise, from left: Charles and Diane Ruffner wear memorial bracelets for their son, Matthew; the team of OC Steven Nusca, Carmelo, OC Tara McConnell, Cindy Carmelo and OC Rob Allsop; marchers ascend steep grades around mile 12; Nusca with the keystone.

Right: Carmelo straps the keystone onto McConnell before the final stretch. The team members exchanged it on the march, so each could bear the names.

Bottom right: McConnell and Allsop shake hands with event staff as the team crosses the finish line at Strickler Field, completing the arduous 28-mile course.



Each year, it’s common for marchers to wilt near mile 19. After long stretches of broken terrain, this section features improved road—but it’s a psychological beast. From miles 19 to 23, it’s all rise.

Allsop is bearing the keystone at this point, but McConnell plans to take it at mile 23 and carry it across the finish line. The setting sun is filtering through the trees and stretching out shadows. The marchers are covered in sweat with hunched shoulders and heavy brows. But the determination is there. There is no talk of stopping. This march is not for them.

It’s mile 23. Allsop places his hands on the keystone, while Carmelo unstraps it. Like an exchange of armor, Allsop firmly gives the keystone to McConnell, who presses it against her chest. Her eyes look far away. She stands motionless while Carmelo fastens the straps in a silence of his own.

“Sorry you have to touch my sweaty body,” McConnell cracks, with her characteristic humor. Carmelo smiles. But as McConnell shoulders her ruck, her eyes reach out again to some invisible distance. Her demeanor is somber. As she walks, she places her hands beneath the keystone, as if it were fragile. The sun is behind her. Walking into her shadow, she shares a memory. Her voice trembles but is strong underneath.

“I lost my friend in Iraq,” she says, mentioning Master Sergeant Sean Thomas, who was killed during a rocket attack in Baghdad on March 27, 2007. Over a thousand Soldiers showed up to his funeral.

“It was crazy,” McConnell says. “It was one of the most tragic things I’ve ever seen. It was really hard at the same time, because we were his pallbearers.”

McConnell says that after his death, it was hard for his family, and her ties—previously close—grew

distant. So, for McConnell, losing Thomas was like losing an entire family. But today, she marches for him.

“It’s a nice way to remember,” McConnell says.

Reflecting, she adds, “I’ve been in 14 years, and my family still doesn’t understand this. So, I won’t even tell them I marched 28 miles today or what it was for.”

By mile 25, Carmelo and his group have returned to the old trail. With three miles left, their feet are striking old ground. They will make it. Dialogue consists mostly of short exclamations. At mile 27, the marker reads: “SPC Chad Allen Edmundson 27MAY2009-Iraq (OIF).” Carmelo knows this name. He rendered the final honors at Edmundson’s funeral.

Pressing toward Strickler Field, the finish is unceremonious. Carmelo’s team crosses through the red arch again. They exhale, bend their knees and catch their breath. They shake hands, embrace with relief.

Within minutes, Carmelo’s group is gone. There is nothing at the finish for them. To find what they came for, one must look back. For 28 miles of remembrance, Carmelo looked back for Rogers, for Edmundson. For 28 miles, McConnell looked back for Thomas. Charles and Diane Ruffner looked back for their son, Matthew. A keystone bridges the gap between two edifices. Here, memory is the link between the living and the fallen. Their immense sacrifice pervades the present, but for 28 miles in Fort Indiantown Gap, PA, the present reaches back and vows: You are not forgotten. **GX**

