

Donn Esmonde: A sad return for Cote, but spirit is alive

By Donn Esmonde

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Jonathon Cote came alive Friday morning. He came alive at his funeral, his spirit seemingly given flesh and blood by the words of those who loved him.

I did not know the young man. But by the time the eulogies ended and the remembrances ceased, I felt like I could reach out and touch him.

The words were evidence of the love he sparked in his 25 years. The tears — streaking the faces of guys still shedding their teenage skin, who seem too young to know such sorrow — were a testament to the lives he touched. Cote was an American classic, a military-minded James Dean, an impossibly good-looking guy who jumped out of airplanes, sped along open roads on his motorcycle and grabbed every passing thrill by the throat. With sculpted cheekbones and Colgate smile, he was a 21st century Jack Armstrong — every mother's son, every girl's dream date.

Dress him in jeans and T-shirt and you had a Hollister ad. Put him in an Army uniform and you had a recruiting poster. Send him on a mission and — as it turned out — you had a hero. While guarding a military convoy in Iraq, Cote was captured and held by insurgents for 17 months, then beaten to death. His body was found last week.

His lust for adventure — thoughts of an accounting career were quickly discarded — made Cote a force of nature. It was that thirst for each moment, mixed with love of country, that led to his death. That is the tragedy — a guy bursting like ripe fruit with life was tested, tormented and ultimately taken from us, for no reason other than the twisted rage of his captives. It is no wonder that, at such moments, people face the heavens and ask: Why?

A lot of folks, myself included, believe this war is a tragic mistake, the horrible consequence of a reckless president. Even in the best of views, it is a confusing quagmire. As Cote's father, Francis, said: "Jonathon was kidnapped by the Shiites that [he] was trying to help."

One thing is easy to sort out: When his country called, Jonathon Cote answered.

Some folks, I have heard, do not think Cote was a true hero. I wish that any doubters could have been at his funeral. I wish they had seen the flag-draped coffin, felt the respect for service seeping through the family's layers of grief. Cote was not, it is true, in the U. S. military when he was captured. He was working with a private security force — the sort of company that, in fact, supplements our volunteer army.

His credentials are beyond question. Cote served four years in Iraq and Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne. His e-mail address then was ArmyBoyCote. His father was a Marine for 20 years and fought in the Gulf War. Francis Cote, at 49, looks like he was carved from a block of granite. He took his boys, Jonathon and Chris, on annual camping trips, talking with them around the campfire about leadership and honor.

Jonathon went back to Iraq as a private contractor partly out of service to country. The pay is good — 80 grand a year — but the risks are insane. He was captured while serving as one of just seven men guarding a mile-long convoy. Make no mistake: His family would give every cent Jonathon made, and every cent in their pockets, to have him back.

I do not know what went through his mind during those 523 days of captivity. We can only fill in the blanks of the story. We can only imagine his private battle of courage and fear, of hope and despair, of faith and doubt. They were his finest hours, and they are hidden from our sight.

What we know is enough. The young man, in a sense, came alive Friday. The words of those he left behind brought him back. If not for the flag-draped casket, you would have thought it was a homecoming.

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