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Hundreds pay final respects to Jonathon Cote, Army veteran who was kidnapped and murdered in Iraq

By Dan Herbeck and Lou Michel - News Staff Reporters

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Jonathon M. Cote was no longer a soldier when he died, but the former Amherst man was lauded as a warrior and a war hero Friday at an emotional Mass of Christian Burial.

More than 820 people packed Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic Church in Clarence to honor a young man who was killed after being tortured and held captive for more than a year by Iraqi kidnappers.

In a deeply emotional

two-hour Mass, mourners heard some powerful words from Cote's father, brother, and two clergymen who are close family friends.

They remembered Jonathon as a caring, fun-loving young man who served honorably as a soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan, rising quickly to the rank of sergeant. He was abducted while working as a private security contractor in November 2006.



Dennis C. Enser/Buffalo News

Members of Jonathon Cote's family lay roses on his casket at Mount Calvary Cemetery Friday. From left, his brother, Christopher F. Cote; his mother, Lori A. Silveri; his stepsister, Samantha Shroyer; his stepmother, Nancy Cote, and his father, Francis L. Cote.

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Authorities said Cote, 25, and four co-workers abducted with him were held somewhere in Iraq by terrorists who never asked for a ransom and never publicly explained the reasons for the crime. The victims were abducted while guarding a military supply convoy for the Italian Army.

Talking about his son's life and death in a strong, clear voice, Francis L. Cote delivered a eulogy that lasted more than 30 minutes and had many people in tears.

Cote spoke with delight about his son's nonstop energetic nature and his sense of humor. But he also discussed his deep concerns about the dangers faced by his son and thousands of other private contractors who have assisted the military during the Iraq War.

He said private contractors are needed in Iraq to perform duties that America's "overworked, understaffed" volunteer military doesn't have the personnel to handle.

"Although Jon was not in the armed forces at the time he was killed, he was again serving our country in this war," Cote said. "I believe that Jon and the others were captured to be made examples of, since they represented America."

The private contractors free up Americans in uniform to concentrate on fighting the war, but the use of contractors "also hides the true cost of the war," Cote said.

"Their dead aren't added to the official body count. Their duties and profits are hidden by closed-mouthed executives who won't give the details to Congress."

Two close family friends— Rev. Roy T. Herberger, pastor of SS. Brigid & Columba Catholic Church, and Pastor Randy Rozelle of the Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Clarence — also spoke of Cote's sacrifices.

"I believe he was a hero indeed, who died serving his country," Rozelle said after the Mass. "His life was on the line like everyone else's."

During the Mass, Rozelle told mourners it was understandable for them to be angry at Jonathon's killers. But he urged them to try to control their anger and leave the punishment to God.



Dennis C. Enser / Buffalo News
An honor guard escorts the casket of Jonathon Cote in Mount
Calvary Cemetery.
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Rozelle said some people might feel compelled to be angry with God, the U. S. government and even at Jonathon himself, for deciding to take such a dangerous job.

“Jon’s captors and no one else can be held accountable for this,” Rozelle said.

Rozelle and Francis Cote thanked the people of Western New York for their prayers and kindness to the Cote family during their long ordeal.

Following the remarks of Cote’s father, and Jonathon’s older brother, Christopher, mourners erupted into a lengthy standing ovation.

Those who attended the Mass included Jonathon’s mother, Lori Silveri, who sat in the front row a few seats from her former husband, Francis; friends and other family members; men who served with Jonathon in the Army; some who attended college with him in Florida; and many local police officials, who have worked with Jonathon’s stepmother, Nancy Cote, an agent with the U. S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Army Staff Sgt. Bradley Gaines traveled from Kansas to bid his friend farewell.

“Jonathan and I met in Fort Bragg. We were roommates. He was the happiest, funniest guy I ever met in my life,” Gaines said. “He was a great soldier.”

Some who never met Cote when he was alive also were drawn to his memorial service.

According to church officials, people began filling the pews more than an hour before the Mass began. As Cote’s flag-draped coffin arrived at the church, people stood along the sidewalks on Main Street.

“We didn’t know him, but we wanted to pay our respects,” said Judy Thielman, who lives near the Clarence



Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News
Friends and family console each other after the service at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church May 2 in Clarence.
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church. "I hear the security men are needed over there in Iraq to help our troops."

Observing the motorcycle escorts provided by police agencies and the New York Patriot Guard Riders, and spotting a huge American flag hung from a volunteer fire company's ladder truck 50 feet above Main Street, Thielman added, "This is an honor he's getting."

Linda Mary Hall, another neighborhood resident, stood reverently with two young grandchildren in a double-seated stroller. She said she was "deeply touched" by Cote's story, adding that she "can't imagine" what kind of ordeal his parents went through during his captivity.

"He's a true hero," she said.

The idea of raising the American flag in front of the church was decided on only hours before the service, according to Mark Forbach, a member of the Harris Hill No. 6 Volunteer Fire Company.

"He's a fallen vet, and we have a lot of veterans in our fire company," Forbach said.

The bodies of Cote and his co-workers— Joshua Munns, John Roy Young, Paul Reuben and Bert Nussbaumer — were found in Iraq and identified in recent weeks. Family members of the victims said the men may have been dead for two months or more before they were found.

Autopsies revealed that the men were brutally tortured by their killers, according to what family members of the victims have told The Buffalo News. Jonathon Cote's relatives have not yet received the results of his autopsy.

Christopher Cote spoke lovingly of his brother's positive attitude and "remarkable talent for turning any situation into a good one."

"If you were with Jon, the bad times were few and far between," Cote said.

The former soldier was buried in Mount Calvary Cemetery.

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Dennis C. Enser / Buffalo News

Lori Ann Silveri, Jonathon's mother, is presented with the flag that was draped over her son's casket at Mount Calvary cemetery.

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Dennis C. Enser / Buffalo News
Family members come to the altar.
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Dennis C. Enser / Buffalo News
Funeral services for Jonathon Cote.
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Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News

**A motorcycle honor guard acts as escort in the funeral of
Jonathon Cote in Clarence.**

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Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News

Members of the Patriot Guard Riders hold flags in honor of Jonathon M. Cote outside Dengler & Roberts Funeral Home in East Amherst.

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Dennis C. Enser / Buffalo News

The Harris Hill Volunteer Fire Department brought out a high rise ladder and a large American flag to honor Jonathon Cote at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Williamsville.

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Dennis C. Enser / Buffalo News
Mombrea family members, including some of Cote's
cousins, sing during the Mass.
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Dennis Enser - bn

The Casket of Jonathon Cote is carried to a memorial service at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church on Friday, May 02, 2008 in Clarence ,NY.Cote's body was discovered on April 19 in Iraq and identified by FBI after he was kidnapped in southern Iraq,on Nov. 16, 2006 while working for Crescent Security Group . (PHOTO/Dennis Enser,The Buffalo News)

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Dennis Enser/Buffalo News

More than 850 people packed the pews at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Clarence.

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Dennis C. Enser/ Buffalo News
Jonathon Cote's brother, Christopher, and his
mother, Lori A. Silveri, mourn at the burial
service in Mount Calvary Cemetery Friday. More
photos on Picture Page, C10.

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Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News
Mourners comfort each other
outside funeral services Friday.
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