

A hero's story is now a documentary on the History Channel

by John Wilkens

In the 2 1/2 years since Marine Sgt. Rafael Peralta died in Iraq - he smothered a grenade with his body during house-to-house combat - his story has meant different things to different people.

PATRIOT ACT - Sgt. Rafael Peralta needed a green card to join the Marines. The day he received it, he signed up. His recruiter, interviewed in the documentary 'Act of Honor,' remembers him placing the card on the desk: 'I'm ready to go.' He died in Iraq when he smothered a grenade to save his fellow Marines. CNS Photo courtesy of the Peralta family. **OVER THERE** - Rafael Peralta (right), is behind a dirt barricade with another Marine in Iraq. 'Be proud of me,' he wrote in a letter to his brother, Ricardo. 'I'm going to make history and do something that I always wanted to do.' CNS Photo courtesy of the Peralta family. **EARLY DAYS** - The History Channel documentary, 'Act of Honor,' traces Peralta's life from his early days in Tijuana, Mexico - he's seen here in a photo from second grade - to his move to San Diego, where he attended Morse High School. When the war in Iraq started, 'he wanted to go so bad,' a sister recalled. CNS Photo courtesy of the Peralta family. President Bush, in a Memorial Day weekend radio address, cited him as an example of courage and sacrifice.

Emilio Gonzalez, director of a federal citizenship agency, used Peralta in a newspaper column celebrating immigrants "eager to earn their place in their new communities."

In the book "Home of the Brave," authors Wynton Hall and Caspar Weinberger pointed to Peralta, who has been nominated for the Medal of Honor, as the kind of hero they believe the national media has ignored in its coverage of the war.

And for Marine Sgt. Nicholas Jones, who was in the room when the grenade exploded, Peralta is a daily source of gratitude. "Somebody gives you another chance at life, you never forget that," he said.

Peralta's story, in all its facets, is the focus of a new television documentary, "Act of Honor," on both English- and Spanish-language versions of the History Channel.

"What we do is who we are," said Marlene Braga, the film's executive producer. "We act all day, every day. What Rafael Peralta did, at the end of the day, was an honorable act."

Peralta was 25 when he died. He grew up in Tijuana, Mexico, and went to Morse High School in San Diego, where he met a Marine recruiter. He enlisted in 2000, on the same day he received his green card.

His father's death in a truck accident the next year kept him stateside, but when the war started in 2003, he was antsy to go. "I'm not doing anything here," his mother, Rosa, remembers him saying.

He was sent first to a base in Hawaii, then to Iraq. "He was real quiet, read his Bible all the time," Jones said, "but we broke him out of his shell."

He remembers Peralta as "a model Marine" who wanted his uniform to look perfect but was always ready to have fun, too. He said Peralta tried to teach him how to salsa.

In March 2004, Fallujah was the site of one of the war's signature horrors: four American security contractors were killed and their charred corpses were dragged through the streets and hung from a bridge. Coalition forces - including Peralta's platoon - were sent in.

Peralta was a platoon scout who regularly joined six-man "stacks" as they cleared houses one by one, block by block, never sure what they would encounter when they kicked in the front door.

On Nov. 6, 2004, Peralta, the oldest of four siblings, wrote letters home to Ricardo, his brother, then 14, and Karen, 12, his youngest sister. (Another sister, Icela, 24, was married and living in Florida.)

"We are going to defeat the insurgents," the letter to Ricardo read. "Watch the news, it's going to be all over. Be proud of me, bro, I'm going to make history and do something that I always wanted to do."

Nine days later, Peralta's group broke through a door in a house and "they opened up on us," Jones said. "We walked into an ambush."

Peralta was shot in the face and chest and fell to the ground. Four other Marines maneuvered in the room around him, returning fire. One of the insurgents rolled in a grenade and it landed about a foot away from Peralta.

Jones said Peralta grabbed the grenade with his right hand and pulled it to his chest. The others turned away as it exploded. They were peppered with shrapnel and suffered minor injuries.

"I'm absolutely convinced that the rest of us wouldn't be here if he hadn't done what he did," Jones said.

Braga said her crew worked on the film for more than two years. "We carefully tried to avoid crafting a love letter or involving ourselves in any rants," she said. "We didn't want to take sides. We're here to tell the story."

She saw it first as dramatic tale with a classic structure - strong characters, conflict, a narrative arc - but then recognized it as something more.

"I was most impressed by the quiet strength and dignity of the family he was a part of," Braga said. "This was a family that believed in the American dream, in living a decent, generous life, in giving back, in working within the structures and laws of this country," she said. "And they understood that the country, in turn, would give back to them."

Peralta had copies of the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence on his bedroom wall at home. After joining the Marines, he became a U.S. citizen, just as his father had. In his letter home to Ricardo, he talked about how proud he was to be an American.

Some of the most powerful moments in the documentary are spent with the family. It opens at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego, on the first anniversary of Peralta's death. The siblings bring flowers. Tears flow. Jones turns to Rosa, the mother, and says, "Thank you for raising him the way you did."

Rosa, speaking in Spanish, says she had a bad feeling the day her son died - nervous and agitated. Icela felt it, too.

Premonitions apparently run in the family. Jones said Peralta talked regularly about how he expected to die in Iraq; he pestered his commander for details on life insurance and burial arrangements.

"If anything happens to me, just remember I lived my life to the fullest and I'm happy with what I lived," Peralta said in the letter to his brother. It arrived the day after the family was told about his death.

In the film, Ricardo says he didn't think much about the military until his brother died. Now he wants to join the Marines, too.

His mother is opposed. "If they're going to kill you over there, I may as well kill you myself," she says. But she also acknowledges that when he's old enough, he can sign up without her permission.

A couple of Marines who served with Peralta visit the family at their home. Ricardo tells them about his plans. He says he made a promise to his brother after he died, at the wake. "I need to do something. I feel like I have to avenge him somehow."

One of the Marines replies, "Going into combat is not like the movies."

The cameras follow Ricardo and Karen as they attend Devil Pups, a 10-day summer camp at Camp Pendleton. It teaches physical conditioning, leadership and self-confidence. At the end of a strenuous hike, as the Pups are given medallions, one of the instructors stops in front of Ricardo.

"You did it for yourself, right?" the instructor asks.

"No, sir," Ricardo answers.

"Yes, you did," instructor says."

"No, sir."

He did it for his brother.

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The legend of Rafael Peralta grows with each telling of his story, with each appropriation of it by those trying to make a larger point. About bravery. About immigrants. About patriotism.

Peralta "understood that America faces dangerous enemies, and he knew the sacrifices required to defeat them," Bush said in his radio address, in May 2005.

"Rafael Peralta was not born in America, but he died defending her," Weinberger and Hall wrote in their book, published last year.

When Pablo Paredes, a Navy petty officer, got headlines for refusing an order to board a ship bound for Iraq, Oliver North wrote in a December 2004 column, "It is a shame that the media focus on such acts when they could tell stories about real heroes like Rafael Peralta."

His legend will grow even more if he is a posthumous recipient of the rarest of military awards, the Medal of Honor.

Only about 3,440 service members have received the medal since it was first awarded, in 1863, during the

Civil War. That includes two from Iraq: Army Sgt. Paul R. Smith and Marine Cpl. Jason L. Dunham. Both were killed in the actions that led to their nominations.

Because it is considered the nation's highest award for combat valor, the review process is extensive - about a dozen levels of scrutiny. Smith's medal came in April 2005, two years after he died. Dunham's came in January, about 2 1/2 years after he was nominated.

Criteria includes performing, at risk of death, an act of personal bravery or self-sacrifice that is conspicuously above and beyond the call of duty. Multiple eyewitnesses are required.

Smothering a grenade to save the lives of others is an example of battlefield valor that's been recognized with the medal before. It's what Dunham did.

The Marines who were with Peralta that day have provided statements, written and oral, to various investigators over the months. Jones, for one, has no doubt the medal is deserved.

"As soon as we were done fighting that day, I sat down with all my guys and we had a moment of silence," he said. "I told them, 'Don't ever forget what just happened. Don't forget what he did for us. It's something that will be in the history books.'"

During training, Marine recruits often hear tales about combat heroes. Rafael Peralta is now part of the lore. "In boot camp these days," Jones said, "pretty much everyone who comes out knows the story."

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