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Mother of Iraq War Vet Who Committed Suicide Flies Flag Upside Down

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By Matthew Rothschild

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Terri Jones lost her son Jason Cooper just over a year ago.

He was an Army Reservist in the Iraq War.

On July 14, 2005, four months after returning home to Iowa, he hanged himself.

He was 23.

Since then, Jones flies her American flag upside down, though someone came on her property once and turned it right side up, and another person stole it.

Jones says Jason wasn't the same when he got back from Iraq.

"He was a really upbeat, happy, funny kid" before he left, she says. "You could tell his smile was gone when he came home."

He also had a hard time paying attention.

"We did notice right away that he'd space off while you were trying to talk to him," she says. "His thoughts were floating off somewhere else."

And the reaction of some of his friends caught him by surprise.

"He was excited to see them," she says, "and he thought they would be, 'Hey, Coop, good to see you.' But instead, the first thing that would come out was, 'Jas, you shoot anybody?' He was so taken aback he didn't know how to answer. He'd just say, 'I don't want to talk about it.'"

Jones tells me her son was hit by enemy fire. "His flack jacket took 37 pieces of shrapnel," she says. "He didn't even get a bruise."

Jones also told Jennifer Jacobs of the [Des Moines Register](#) [1] of one haunting memory he had about an insurgent who executed an Iraqi child in full view of Cooper and other members of his unit.

Jason was having a lot of nightmares and flashbacks, his mother says. "His girlfriend said he'd wake up in night sweats, and she had to take him out for a walk at three in the morning."

Jones says she really got worried three days before her son died.

"He called me at work towards the end of the day," she says. "He was at the mall. He was crying. He was really disoriented. He didn't know what was happening. He was afraid. He told me a friend of his had just died. I asked what his name was. And he said Jeremy Ridlen, who had died a year before." (Ridlen, an Army National Guard Specialist, died in East Fallujah on May 23, 2004.)

Jones says her son "knew he needed help, but he didn't want to go to the VA." She says he'd gone there the month before, after he hurt his wrist in a motorcycle fall. "When he went to the VA, they didn't have room to treat him that day," she says.

Plus, she says, he was worried about the stigma he might get if he appeared to be weak.

"He was still active duty," she says, and "he knew he would have to go back" to Iraq.

Jones says the military isn't doing enough for soldiers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. "They are not being taken care of," she says.

The VA denies this.

"We're out there in their faces. . . . We're all there for them," Victor Tate, a VA outreach specialist in Iowa, told the Des Moines Register. "At no time in the history of America has more attention been paid to veterans."

Now a member of Gold Star Families for Peace, Jones says she's "forming a subchapter support group to help with military families who've had a suicide" after their loved one returned home.

"So far we know of about 70" such tragedies, she says.

Recently, Jones wrote a letter to Jason, which she posted on his memorial [website](#) [2].

"Jas, Mother's Day came and went, and it was so hard not to hear from you. You always had something that you were so proud to give me. I still have petals from the pink roses you sent while still in training or all the drawings you loved to make. I carried your military boots in a Mother's Day march in Washington, DC, to bring our troops home now. . . . I realized then that I did spend time with you on Mother's Day and even though it wasn't in a way that I would prefer, you will never be gone from me. You will always be in my mind and heart. . . . I hope you are in a sea of flowers now honey. No worries, no pain, just happy and enjoying the beauty of heaven. I miss you, buddy! I still wait for a phone call, I still long to hear 'love you, Mama.' . . . I am so grateful that you were my son to leave life-long memories. Love you the mostest, Mama."

In that letter, she talked about the upside down flag. "I must admit that I never really liked the idea of the flag hanging upside down," she wrote, "but it did represent a signal of distress so I agreed to keep it that way."

One day early this March, Jones says someone turned their flag rightside up. "It happened between the time we went to the grocery store and came back. We were gone only half an hour," she says. "I was kind of shocked. We live on a five-acre piece of land on a really long driveway, and the flag is on the house. They had to be watching us leave. That's kind of weird, someone sitting out in a corner watching us somewhere."

About a week later, she got an unsigned letter, postmarked March 13.

"I've noticed for quite some time now that you fly your American flag upside down. . . . Please don't disrespect those who have fought and died on our soil preserving your very freedom and mine. . . . Let's rally behind our troops and if they don't believe in what they're doing, let them voice it. Every single person in the armed forces today signed on the dotted line. . . . I know your flag is sending out a message that you might not have though it was sending. So I felt compelled to tell you what I thought."

It was signed, "An extremely sincere fellow American citizen and proud of it."

And in the P.S., the person added: "If it truly is that you hate living in this country and are ashamed of our freedom, then by all means, sir, why do you live here?"

In response, Jones wrote a letter to the editor of her local newspaper, the Chariton Leader.

"To the Person Who Didn't Sign Their Letter," Jones began. She explained that "flying our flag upside down in no way shows disrespect for our country. Flying the flag upside down is a sign of distress as stated in the United States Code of Flag Rules and Regulations." She told of how her son was proud to be an American soldier, and even wanted to go back to Iraq. "But somehow, in four short months after returning home, his belief, pride, and willingness was eroded away by the invisible wounds of war."

She discussed his suicide: "On July 14, after weeks of flashbacks and nightmares and having no medical help (yes, the VA turns them away) he took off his dog tags, walked to the basement of his home and wrapped a rope around his neck. And at 5 pm my precious son and proud warrior stepped off the chair."

She asked for some understanding.

"Try explaining to Jason's 13-year-old brother who planned on following Jason's footsteps what went wrong," she wrote. "Try explaining to the 8th Grade Confirmation Class who Jason had just personally thanked for their support during his deployment what went wrong. And most of all, try seeing the fear in Jason's Brother in Arms eyes as their trembling hands pull the American flag from his coffin and neatly fold it and present it to his family. Fearing their own future. So you ask why our flag is flying upside down. Because our soldiers are in distress and because of that very contract you talked about that they signed, they are not allowed to voice their opinion, so they rely on us to do so."

She went on to say that "our country is in distress" for the way it has failed its vets. And she concluded: "When you drive by my house and see my flag flying I challenge you to help me turn it right side up. Show me that you are willing to do what it takes to help those that protect our rights and freedoms. And when I see that no soldier has been left behind, then that will be a day of joy for me to

fly her right side up.”

Shortly after her letter appeared in the paper, her flag was stolen in the middle of the night. “They took the whole flagpole and everything right out of the holder,” she says.

“I just went and got another one and put it back up.”

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Links:

[1] <http://desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060521/NEWS11/605210341/1001/NEWS&lead=1>

[2] <http://jason-cooper.memory-of.com/>