



## Honoring the Fallen

Matthew Holley was the son every parent wants — smart, handsome, creative, and filled with purpose. A three-time AAU national karate champion, he was an exceptionally-skilled athlete. He was also recognized as a gifted amateur artist. With his talent and his drive, Matthew could have excelled in nearly any profession he chose. He chose to be a Soldier.

When Matthew enlisted in the United States Army in February of 2004, he was following the example of generations of his family. His father and his mother were both Army veterans. Between uncles, cousins, and grandfathers, the Holley family had collectively served more than 150 years in uniform since World War II, and Matthew was ready to do his part. But most importantly, Matthew was excited to be following in his father's footsteps.



The day he graduated from Air Assault School Matthew called home, saying, "I've got my wings, Dad. We can put them with yours." Matthew put in for assignment to his father's old unit, the 101st Airborne. He got his wish and became a Screaming Eagle, just like his dad before him. He chose his military specialty, Combat Medic, because he wanted to help people, again following the example set by his father, who has been both a paramedic and a professional firefighter.

To say that John and Stacey Holley were proud of their son would be a monumental understatement. So they were understandably devastated when an Army sergeant and an Air Force chaplain rang their doorbell on November 16, 2005.

### About Jeff Edwards:



Jeff Edwards is a retired U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer, a Naval Warfare Specialist, and an award-winning novelist. He is currently working as a civilian expert consultant to the Naval Mine and Anti-Submarine Warfare Command, the Navy's think tank for high-tech undersea warfare.

His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

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Matthew had been killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq, only six weeks after reporting for duty in the Middle East.

John and Stacey were still reeling from the news when they were hit with another staggering revelation. Matthew's remains were being shipped to San Diego as freight on a commercial airliner. There would be no honor guard on the runway at Lindbergh Field. No ceremony would welcome this fallen Soldier home into the arms of his family. Matthew's casket would be traveling in the luggage compartment of the plane. It would be offloaded last, so that passengers on the flight wouldn't have to wait the few extra minutes for their suitcases to arrive on the baggage carousels.

The more John and Stacey Holley learned of the logistics of their son's impending arrival, the angrier they became. There would be a Soldier flying in the passenger cabin to act as escort for the body, but all semblance of military dignity would stop there. The casket containing Matthew's body would be unloaded using a forklift, deposited on a wheeled luggage cart, and hauled across the tarmac with all the care and ceremony given to a crate of running shoes. The family would not even be allowed to meet his remains on the runway. They could claim his casket from the holding area for oversized luggage.

The Holley family was appalled. Their only son, who had given his very life in the service of his country, was to be handled like a piece of freight. Even worse, he was to be treated as *low priority* freight: unloaded only after the rest of the luggage was safely in the hands of the passengers.

To their horror and amazement, John and Stacey learned that this is standard practice for returning the remains of deceased service members. Honors and ceremonies come later, at the memorial service and funeral. Everything before that point is handled using routine procedures designed for commercial freight.

The Holleys contacted the Casualty Assistance Officer assigned to their family, and he started making phone calls on their behalf. If John and Stacey had anything to say about it, their beloved son was not going to arrive like a crate of auto parts. They didn't expect waving flags, a military band, and a twenty-one gun salute. They simply wanted to meet their son's body on the runway, with a small honor guard and a level of respect appropriate to a man who has sacrificed everything for his nation.

The Casualty Assistance Officer contacted the office of California Senator [Barbara Boxer](#). The Senator made a few phone calls of her own, and suddenly all reluctance and red tape vanished. The Holleys were allowed to meet their son on the runway at Lindbergh Field. A small honor guard joined them in welcoming their fallen warrior home to American soil.

They had won the battle to bring Matthew home with dignity. For many families, it might have ended there. But twenty minutes on the phone with John Holley reminded me of where Matthew had inherited his strength and his sense of purpose. Both of Matthew's parents are veterans. They're both patriots. They're both fighters. And neither one of them is prepared to stand by while this happens to other families.



“We got Matt his due,” John Holley told me. “We could just let it drop. But we owe it to the mothers and fathers of other fallen service members to keep at this until it changes.”

A few hours after we spoke, John forwarded me an email copy of an open letter that he and Stacey are sending to veterans all over America. With his permission, I’m reprinting it here:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is time for veterans across this country to close ranks and unify on the issue of proper rendering of honors for our fallen heroes upon return to their home of record. We corrected this indignity for our son SPC. Matthew John Holley and could have kept silent afterwards. However, we felt that no soldier returning home after making the ultimate sacrifice should be disrespected by being handled as common baggage.

We can no longer sit around on our hands and wait years until politicians wet their fingers and decide what’s best for us. WE are the people, WE are the Veterans, and WE need to stand and be recognized.

Our sons and daughters over the decades have made the ultimate sacrifice upon being called or volunteering to serve their country. They went and did their duty for their country, and it’s time to stop walking on eggshells and fight for this cause.

This is not about politics; this is about respect for our fallen heroes!

We were warriors once and as such we need to be again!

Regards,

John M. Holley and Stacey L. Holley

Congressman [Duncan Hunter](#), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, has joined the Holley family in their efforts to change the policies governing the handling of deceased service members. He’s written a formal letter to Secretary of Defense [Donald Rumsfeld](#), requesting a revision of Department of Defense policy to establish a system for transporting military remains by military aircraft to the U.S. military base closest to the service member’s hometown. The letter further requests that a small military honor guard be present to meet the aircraft, to render appropriate military honors to the deceased service member. Congressman Hunter has also initiated an amendment to *House Resolution 1815*, proposing similar changes to U.S. law.



Opponents of such a policy shift are quick to point out that the military is prohibited from competing against civilian air carriers in non-combat operations. In simple terms, if commercial airlines *can* do a job that doesn't involve combat operations, the military cannot take it away from them.

That raises an interesting question in my mind. Can civilian airlines really do this job the way it needs to be done? That depends on where we draw the line. One school of thought suggests that skilled and expeditious handling is enough to preserve the dignity of a fallen Soldier. By unspoken implication, the niceties of ceremony are pleasant to have, but fundamentally unimportant.

If that reasoning holds true, then an engagement ring received from the trembling fingers of a loving suitor is precisely equal to one that arrives in a cardboard box from a parcel delivery service. As long as the box is well packed and the contents arrive in good condition, there is no value lost even though the niceties have been stripped away. In terms of strict economic value, that may be true. If the weight and craftsmanship of the gold are identical, and the size and cut of the stone are the same, it doesn't matter how the ring is delivered. Or does it matter after all?

Human beings are creatures of symbolism and emotion. A heartfelt proposal of marriage can create a memory that will be cherished for a lifetime. A parcel arriving by express delivery cannot. Symbols matter. Emotions matter. Memories matter. We learn that lesson again every time some distraught man or woman rushes back into a burning house to rescue an album of treasured photographs.

Our symbols and our memories affect us so profoundly that we structure our very lives around them. We literally live and die by them. To treat such things as though they are unimportant is to disregard the very nature of human existence.

If the tributes we offer to our fallen Soldiers are inconsequential, then we should do away with them entirely. If the flag draped casket, and the hand salute, and the pomp and ceremony that we render to our dead are a sham, we should save ourselves the trouble and the expense. No formal funeral. No folded flag. No gun salute. If these symbols and ceremonies are irrelevant, we should forego them completely and stop pretending. If — on the other hand — these symbols mean something, then they are as important on the runway at Lindbergh Field as they are at the cemetery.

Matthew John Holley was as bright and promising a young man as this nation has ever sired. He gave his life in the cause of freedom, and he asked for nothing in return. America can do better than forklifts and luggage carts. We owe it to Matthew. We owe it to his family, and to the families of all of our fallen Soldiers. And I sincerely believe that we owe it to ourselves.

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