

A soldier's final march

Family, friends honor Christopher Swanson; staff sergeant was killed July 22 in Iraq

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SUN REPORTER

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 2, 2006

The casket tilted slightly, suggesting that the weight of their task was almost too much for the men in white gloves and dress blues.

Walking slowly behind Army Staff Sgt. Christopher W. Swanson's flag-draped coffin, his father, Gary, pumped his fist, as if he were bracing himself. He, his wife, Kelly, and their son, Kenneth, clutched tissues and each other.

They and about 300 others gathered yesterday at First Baptist Church of Upper Marlboro to praise and remember Sergeant Swanson, 25, a decorated soldier from southern Anne Arundel County. He died July 22 in Ramadi, Iraq, when his patrol came under fire during combat operations.

Earlier that day, Sergeant Swanson, who was on his third tour in Iraq, had been passing out candy and stuffed animals to local children, a soldier who served with Sergeant Swanson wrote on a memorial Web site.

Sergeant Swanson's wooden casket came to rest among red roses and pink lilies, beneath the pulpit where many had previously prayed for him.

They prayed again yesterday as they "lay Chris down so that he may live eternally," said Kevin Rogers, one of his fellow church members, during the invocation.

From his family, the messages from a video display were simple:

"We will always love you and miss you. Thank you for being a wonderful son and brother. ... Thank you for being yourself. ... We, as everyone in this place, will get through this."

In a montage of pictures that drew tears from some of the white-robed choir members, Sergeant Swanson, of Rose Haven, seemed comfortable as a soldier.

In grainy, green-tinted photos, he was there with a flashlight, conferring with other soldiers.

And there he was again, his hazel eyes hidden behind sunglasses, with his arms around a beaming Iraqi child.

After the two-hour service, as the hearse headed to Arlington National Cemetery, Dante Griffin remembered Sergeant Swanson as "just a boy full

of energy," and recalled wondering why, as a man, his friend joined the military. He got his answer on Christmas.

"I saw him at church, and it was clear that he'd found his passion in life," Mr. Griffin said. "He didn't ever say anything, and he wasn't in uniform. It was just the way he looked and the way he stood."

Sergeant Swanson joined the Army in August 1999, three months after he graduated from Southern High School. He served in Kosovo in 2001 and served his first tour in Iraq in March 2003.

Sergeant Swanson, who was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 1st Armored Division, based in Baumholder, Germany, was awarded the Bronze Star and received a Presidential Unit Citation for his service, among other commendations. Two Purple Hearts are pending. To his fellow troops, Sergeant Swanson was a leader and a fun-loving person who made the bad times bearable.

"He helped us get through the hardships we endured and always raised morale," said Sgt. William Baxter, who served with Sergeant Swanson as a member of the 82nd Airborne. "We used to talk a lot in the hot heat of the desert ... about family and war. He was a true friend."

Sergeant Swanson's church family drew from various Scriptures to recall his faith, good works and steady hand.

The Rev. Chip Bodie recalled fond times with his friend.

"Chris was the kind of person that would come once in a lifetime, the friend you can make only once in life," said Brodie, a native of Romania. "He is the reason I want to become an American citizen."

One of Sergeant Swanson's mentors, Bill Lowry, called him "tough as gristle."

"It was a pleasure to have known him and watch him grow up," he said. "This young man is an American hero. He is our hero. He is my hero."