

GERMANY (Army News Service, Nov. 4, 2003) –

There are very few events more poignant than a memorial service for a fallen Soldier. The service finishes with a final roll call by the company first sergeant of the Soldier's squad members. Each Soldier in turn responds, "Here, first sergeant." Then, three times in a row, the first sergeant calls out the dead Soldier's name. Finally, after the third silent pause, waiting for a response that will never come, a lone bugler sounds Taps.

This evening I went to a memorial service for Pvt.2 Jonathan Ioakimo Falaniko. Jonathan was killed on Oct. 27 in Baghdad by a rocket-propelled grenade attack. As you would expect, the memorial service was sad, but it was also a profound lesson on faith, selfless service and a family's love. Jonathan's unit, the 70th Engineer Battalion, is part of the Army's 1st Armored Division Engineer Brigade. The senior enlisted soldier in the brigade happened to be Jonathan's father, Command Sgt. Maj. Ioakimo Falaniko.

After the company commander and a few of Jonathan's friends spoke at the memorial service, the command sergeant major stepped forward and spoke. He spoke about Jonathan as both a soldier and a son and his words were truly inspirational. I cannot fully capture in words the profound lessons of faith and selfless service revealed in the life of Jonathan and the tribute by his father, but I think it is important to pass on a small part of it.

Falaniko read from a few of Jonathan's recent letters. For a point of reference, Jonathan was a new soldier, who has been in the Army less than six months. He attended basic training beginning in May of 2003 and deployed to Iraq in August of this year. So his letters capture his thoughts and dreams from the last couple of months. A few things Jonathan wrote really stood out and illustrated the man he was:

Dad, I push myself hard because I know the Drill Sergeants expect a lot out of me.

Dad, when I first got to basic training, I didn't like getting smoked in physical training. But, now I like to get smoked ... I think it is good for me.

Dad, I love being in the Army and I love serving my country.

Dad, this is where I belong and this is where I need to be with you and the other Iron (1st Armored Division) soldiers.

Dad, this place (Iraq) is a mess and I am glad we are here to fix it.

Falaniko finished by sharing from his heart, talking about his son as part of a close family. The kind of kid that always lends a hand to anyone. The kind of kid that loved his sisters and sent them money on every payday just to let them know he was thinking about them. The kind of kid from a strong Christian family that demonstrates his faith by his actions every day. He concluded by saying to the hundreds of Soldiers present, from three-star general to private:

"What our country brings to Iraq is a chance for freedom and democracy...making a difference every day. My son died for a good cause.... he answered the nation's call. Just like a typical

American Soldier, Jonathan was accomplishing his mission, doing what he was supposed to be doing. He had a big heart and he was proud to be a Soldier.”

Then 1st Sgt. Allen called: “Private Falaniko” (Silence)

Again, he called, “Private Jonathan Falaniko” (Silence)

And finally, “Private Jonathan Ioakimo Falaniko” (Silence)

Jonathan Falaniko was a hero who made the ultimate sacrifice. Both he and his father are examples of what makes our Army and our country great. The Army and our nation mourn his death. But, he represents the best of America: strong family, strong faith, strong community and a willingness to serve and help others.

Rest in Peace Jonathan - mission accomplished.

(Editor’s note: Pvt. 2 Jonathan Falaniko is scheduled to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery on the morning of Nov. 7.)