

Christian Widow Reveals Her Courageous Hero's Story

It was the morning of Tuesday, November 16, 2010. I was startled from a deep sleep at 5:28 a.m. I looked at the clock and my first thought was about my husband, Javier. I looked at my cellphone to see if I missed a phone call from him but I hadn't. I then told myself I had an hour and a half before I had to get up to help the kids ready themselves for school.

I woke again at 7 a.m. with lots of energy. I visited my friend's office where we had doughnuts for breakfast. I had a pleasant time visiting with my friends. We talked about Javier, deployments and about what happens when a Marine is killed in action. These are conversations often discussed by spouses of a Marine stationed at Camp Lejeune, yet conversations we never think will become reality in our lives. After breakfast with my friends I went Christmas shopping. Suddenly it began to pour sheets of rain outside and I thought to myself, "If this were a movie or a book this rain would be foreshadow something awful." I was proud of myself for remembering that term 'foreshadow' from college. Soon after this I called Javi's cousin and texted his sister and checked my email. I told myself I had to text Javi's brother, Orlando, to find out about the Christmas plans.

I then drove home singing to the song, "Que Precio Tiene El Cielo" by Marc Anthony that was on the radio. I took a sigh of relief as I entered base housing, thanking God that I didn't live in an ugly house, and thought about how much I enjoyed living on base, knowing we are safe and secure. Then my mind raced to thinking about Javi and I was looking forward to his phone call that he promised to me yesterday. I smiled and thought about how my life was perfect and was getting better, despite Javier being deployed. I felt so happy and I couldn't wait to tell Javier that he made me even happier.

I drove into the driveway and took my Christmas purchases inside, running in as it was still raining. Then I saw three packages that I had packed and wrapped the night before which were Javier's Christmas gifts. I took them to the car and placed them in the passenger seat so that I could take them to the post office and mail them to Afghanistan.

After this I started to wrap other gifts for friends and family and told myself to hurry up because Javier was going to call soon. I was so excited to hear his voice again. I couldn't wait to tell him that his Christmas presents were on their way—then the doorbell rang.

When the doorbell rang I thought, "Who would that be?" I wasn't expecting anybody and from where I was sitting I looked out the glass storm door and didn't see anyone. So I ignored it at first thinking maybe it was a kid playing pranks. Then the doorbell rang again. I still couldn't see anyone but I got up and went to the door.

When I walked toward the door I saw three men standing to the left of the door, two of them were wearing Marine green alpha uniforms and one man was wearing a Navy uniform. I could tell that the man in the Navy uniform was older and he had a cross on his uniform signifying he was a Chaplain. Then I could tell that one Marine was an officer, and he was the tallest of the three and the other Marine was a staff sergeant from the chevrons sewn on his uniform.

I was surprised to see them at my door. When I opened the door wide enough for them to talk, one of them said, "Mrs. Ortiz Rivera?" I said, "Yes, what are you doing here?"

They said, "We need to speak with you regarding your husband. May we come inside?"

All at once my heart dropped and I reached to touch it, as I could feel all the blood in my body rush to my feet. I was weak in my knees and started to feel dizzy and scared. I

wanted to slam the door in their face. I am pretty sure when they asked if they can come inside that I shook my head, "No."

They insisted on speaking with me inside so I let them in. They followed me into dining room. I don't remember what they were saying as they walked in. I stood between the living room and dining room and I threw my hands up in the air and I said, "Just tell me, just tell me!" I knew what they were going to say, I just wanted them to hurry up and say it.

The chaplain had a look of pity on his face, and I decided to look directly at the captain, choosing to ignore the staff sergeant and chaplain. I looked at him in his eyes telling myself that if he was giving me bad news I was forcing him to look into my soul and break my heart. I focused on the captain's eyes so much that the color of his eyes are forever etched in me. The captain took a deep breath and then started off saying, "The President of the United States and the Department of Defense..." The words after this were a blur to me and I vaguely remember them, but the only words I really heard were, "Your husband passed away this morning."

It all felt like a like a nightmare. I was instantly in shock and disbelief. I remember saying, "What? No! I just talked to him. He is going to call me today! When? How?"

A million thoughts went through my mind such as, "Javier couldn't die, he promised he didn't die, its a mistake, there is no way a staff sergeant can die. He told me his job was to stay alive so he could lead his Marines; he is too good of a Marine! He is a Marine grunt with good training, there is no way he can die. He has too much life to live. Javier is not one of those Marines that dies."

The captain told me it was not a mistake, and that Javier passed away. I then got angry; I was frustrated at the choice of words the captain was using. If it was true that my husband was dead, he didn't "pass away." People "pass away" when they

are sick or old. If my husband died, then he was killed by a faceless coward. I proceeded to correct the officer.

He shook his head, saying that my husband was killed in action. My next question was, "How? What did those cowards do to him?"

He replied in a broken voice, "IED." Improvised Explosive Device.

I asked more questions, wanting to know if anyone else was killed or hurt. Those were Javier's Marines with him. What about them? I then asked about the condition of my husband's body and the Captain didn't want to tell me the details. At that point I took the casualty report from out of his hands and read it to myself.

I was instantly sick to my stomach. The casualty report had more details, details a wife shouldn't know yet needs to know. I could no longer stand at this point. I felt as if someone had literally ripped my heart out and kicked me in the stomach. I couldn't stand. I nearly fell onto the stairs crying.

No one knew what to do. When the Marines and chaplain spoke it sounded like distant echoes in my ears. I could no longer see their faces as tears gushed from my eyes. I no longer wanted them in my home, I just wanted to have a friend with me.

The captain knelt beside me and I think he wanted to hug me but my body language told him to stay away. I felt anger surge through me. I felt like punching him, then slapping the staff sergeant and yell at the chaplain. I was angry at them for ruining my life and just wanted them to leave. I told them to go, and I wanted to run upstairs to scream and yell and cry.

But they could not leave me home alone. I was unable to call Javier's family because they had not been notified yet like me. I sat on my steps, feeling like passing out, feeling

alone, nauseated, weak. I wanted to sleep and never wake up. Despite being unable to call Javier's family I was able to call my friend Eta. I told her I needed her to come over to my house because there were some strange men in uniform at my house who told me that Javier had died. They were unwelcome visitors standing in my kitchen.

Eta thought someone was playing a cruel joke on me and arrived in only a few minutes. She ran up the sidewalk barging into my house, running in. She stopped immediately upon seeing the men in uniform. She grabbed me and hugged me. My mind was so foggy but I focused on the pink sweater she was wearing. I focused on it so that I didn't have to think about the reality that was setting in.

Now that I was no longer alone, the Marines had to do their job. They provided paperwork for me to sign. I was frustrated at this. Why would paperwork be provided after receiving such devastating news? I don't even know what I signed, I just signed papers telling them to leave. I wanted to return to my life, folding laundry like I planned, finish wrapping Christmas gifts in my living room and then mailing the gifts for Javi that sat on the passenger seat of my car.

I asked the Marines, "Who are you and why are you here?" I was obviously in shock, not accepting what was taking place. I no longer remember their faces, except face of the man who ripped my heart out, the one who told me the news that my beloved Javi was killed in action.

After the men left, later that night I looked at the casualty report. It said that Javier had been killed in action at 5:26 AM according to Eastern Standard Time. Then I remembered waking up with a start at 5:28 a.m. Maybe my clock was not perfectly synced, or the report determined the correct time, but I believe that I woke at the moment my beloved hero was taken from this life. {eoa}

Reprinted with permission from Veronica's Hero. **Veronica Ortiz Rivera** is a mother of four healthy and very active children. Her life is a testimony of triumph over tragedy, and she desires to honor her husband's memory and help other people. She has traveled extensively to share her story and raise awareness about our heroes in uniform and those they may have left behind upon paying the ultimate sacrifice. The Marine Corps is and always will be part of her life. Write an encouraging note of how her book has helped you by posting on the Veronica's Hero Facebook page.

Jared Laskey served in the United States Marine Corps as a field radio operator for 2nd Battalion 8th Marines, deploying to Iraq in 2007-2008 and Afghanistan, 2009. Jared is a Master of Divinity student at Regent University as he starts Destiny Church in Virginia Beach, VA. Connect with him through twitter @jaredalaskey and through his website, .