

The Men He Left Behind

SGT. FIRST CLASS CARLOS SANTOS-SILVA DIED THE WAY HE SERVED, RIGHT BESIDE HIS MEN. **BRIAN MOCKENHAUPT** VISITS THE SOLDIERS WHO KNEW HIM BEST, AND LAST.

While his men patrolled the farmland of southern Afghanistan, Sgt. First Class Carlos Santos-Silva came home to his wife, Kristen, who had bought a new blue sundress embroidered with pink flowers to greet him at the airport. They'd planned to celebrate their 12th wedding anniversary in Washington, D.C., during his two weeks of leave from the war zone. They would tour the capital and visit some of Santos's men recovering from injuries at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Instead, Kristen wore her new dress to Dover Air Force Base and watched six soldiers carry Santos off a plane in an aluminum box draped in the American flag. "We're

COURTESY SPC. BRENDAN NEENAN

**Fallen warrior: Santos
in battle dress in the
Arghandab River Valley,
Afghanistan, 2010.**



here together,” she told me the night before the funeral and their anniversary, April 12. “This just isn’t how I thought it would be.”

Outside the funeral home in Arlington, Virginia, she gathered with friends and family and handed out balloons, 12 blue and 12 white, for each of their 12 years together. At the signal, the others released their balloons on cue, but Kristen wouldn’t let go. She gazed skyward, and her lips trembled. After a long moment, she opened her hand and watched the balloons rise. “I love you, Carlos, forever and ever and ever,” she said, then covered her face with her hands and shook with sobs. Cameron, their 11-year-old son, stood next to her and pressed his face to her hip.

The next day, under a cloudless sky, she buried Santos, 32 years old, in Arlington National Cemetery. A horse-drawn caisson carried his casket down a road lined with tall shade trees to Section 60, where the headstones chart the histories of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Sgt. First Class Raul Davila stepped to the casket. He and I had both known Santos for years, having served two deployments with him in Iraq. Santos had gone on to become a drill sergeant, training new soldiers, and then a platoon sergeant with Charlie Company, 2-508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, leading 40 men in the Arghandab River Valley, a violent



swath of southern Afghanistan. Davila spoke about how Santos loved being a husband and a father, and a leader of soldiers. “I will forever be honored to call him my friend,” Sergeant Davila said, his voice steady and solemn. “Rest easy, Brother.”

Gunshots cracked the warm morning air, a bugler played “Taps,” and in crisp movements practiced countless times, the burial detail pulled the flag tight and folded it into a neat triangle of stars on a field of blue. A general knelt beside Kristen and handed her the flag. I looked at the crowd, at those who had known Santos at so many points during his life. But what about those who weren’t there, those who knew him best over the past

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seven months, those with him the day his truck rolled over a massive bomb buried in a dirt road snaking through farmers' fields? Santos's men were still working in a lush, dangerous corridor of orchards and grape furrows outside Kandahar City. As has happened thousands of times during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, when soldiers are killed and their bodies sent home, their friends stay behind, to mourn and remember and fight. I wanted to meet the men Santos had lived with and led. And for that, I'd have to go to them, to a place they called the Devil's Playground.

Flying into Afghanistan, I peered out the window at the vast stretches

of brown, interrupted by jagged mountains, scored by rivers, and dotted with villages. Down there, somewhere, Santos had been killed. At this height, such an explosion wouldn't even be visible. But staring at the land where he died and where his men were still fighting, his death seemed more real than it had at the funeral.

I would be staying with Santos's platoon at Combat Outpost Tynes along the edge of the Arghandab River Valley, northwest of Kandahar City. The post was named for another lost soldier, Pfc. Marcus

The men who served with Santos (from left): Lachance, Maher, Taylor, Knollinger, and Rosa, at Fort Bragg, 2010.

Tynes, who was killed November 22, 2009. To get there, I rode in the last truck of a five-vehicle convoy. We'd soon be passing over the very spot where Santos was killed, just beside a small bridge on a road where several bombs had exploded in the past six months. Looking through the windshield from the backseat, I watched a giant fountain of dirt shoot into the air 200 yards ahead. The concussion rattled my chest. "IED! IED! IED!" crackled over the radio, the same call made when Santos's truck was hit. An improvised explosive device planted in the same spot near the bridge had just exploded. But this time the insurgents

Cameron and Kristen Santos-Silva at their home in Fort Bragg.

were too hasty, the bomb went off too early, and the target truck rolled on, its crew uninjured.

After Santos's death, the region became even more dangerous. His men patrolled pomegranate orchards and vineyards where gunmen shot at them from the cover of dense foliage. The roads and trails were laced with buried bombs, making every step a life-or-death gamble, and the heat—100 degrees and humid—left them parched and exhausted. They had been ordered to begin "pacifying" a small stretch of the valley so the Taliban couldn't use it to transport and store weapons and stage attacks on nearby Kandahar City. Their progress was hard to measure. For every bomb found, or fighter captured or killed, there were many more hiding in the valley. But the soldiers kept their fears in check and patrolled the orchards, doing it with a proficiency that would have made Santos proud.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY JARED MOOSSY

At Combat Outpost Tynes, a former school, Santos's legacy was immediately apparent. When the platoon had moved into the compound in December 2009, soldiers slept in the few small classrooms, or outside, until Santos coordinated a construction project. The platoon then extended the structure and built small rooms for each soldier. During the slow, hard work of building up the rooms and the outpost's outer defenses, Santos had been beside his men, filling sandbags and lugging

materials. "He was always hands-on with us," Staff Sgt. Edward Rosa, the platoon's senior squad leader, told me. "He was always out there with us working. He did everything with us. He was about the guys." He organized movie nights with a wide-screen television powered by a gun truck's battery. And at Christmas, after Kristen and the platoon's family support group sent stockings from Fort Bragg, he played Santa at the outpost. He made each man sit on his lap before he'd give him a stocking.

Santos was born in Germany to an Army family and bounced around bases as he grew up. He enlisted in 1996 and trained as a mechanic in an aviation unit at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where he met Kristen, who was also in the Army. But he soon switched to the infantry, where he excelled. I served with him at Fort

Drum, New York, for three years, and he impressed me as the most knowledgeable but laid-back soldier I knew. He could answer any question on tactics, weapon systems, or Army regulations, but he was also quick with wisecracks and constantly concerned about his men. The soldiers at Combat

ON FOOT PATROL THREE MILES AWAY, STAFF SGT. EDUARDO LOREDO HEARD THE EMERGENCY CALL CRACKLE OVER THE RADIO. "OUR GUYS JUST HIT AN IED."

Outpost Tynes told me the same. He played video games with them, gave professional guidance, and counseled them on problems at home. And he often made jokes when his men faced danger, to put them at ease and remind them that good could be found even during dark and fearful times.

"I heard stories about how tight people get when they deploy, but I never knew it could be like this," said Spc. Clayton "Doc" Taylor, the platoon's medic. "I called him Dad." So did many of his men. Sgt. Adam Lachance had never had a male friend like Santos. They had planned a couple of trips to Las Vegas, and Santos and Kristen had visited Lachance and his wife in New Hampshire. Lachance had even turned down a promotion to staff sergeant in February because it would mean switching platoons and leaving Santos.

Each platoon is led by an officer, a first or second lieutenant. The platoon sergeant serves as his right-hand man in administration and logistics. That means Santos could have stayed behind at the outpost while his men patrolled. But he was always with them, as he was on the morning of March 22, in the front passenger seat of a hulking, mine-resistant truck, driving down a dirt road alongside a vineyard, just about to cross that small bridge.

Three miles away, Staff Sgt. Edwardo Loredo heard the call crackle over the radio as he led a foot patrol through the farmland south of the outpost. "Our guys just hit an IED," he said. Sound takes about 15 seconds to travel that far, so another moment passed before they heard the blast. Even at that distance, it rumbled through their chests. The bomb had been huge. The radio crackled again: "Four responsive. One unresponsive."

"IF IT HAPPENED TO SANTOS, IT COULD HAPPEN TO ANY OF US," SAID STAFF SGT. EDWARD ROSA. "THAT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE CRAZINESS."

Loredo's patrol ran toward the sound of the explosion.

Weighed down by 50 pounds of body armor, ammunition, water, radios, and weapons, they ran through farmland that may have been mined. Panting and sweating, leg muscles

and lungs on fire, they arrived just as the medevac helicopter lifted off in a wave of dust that blocked out the sun. A tan armored truck lay on its side, the bottom scorched and the rear tires blown away, next to a deep crater in the dirt road. Sgt. Dale Knollinger, still out of breath, approached Sgt. Gregory Maher, who had been in the four-vehicle patrol.

"He's gone," Maher said.

"Who's gone?" Knollinger asked.

"Sergeant Santos."

Knollinger stood in the road and cried.

For a week afterward, Combat Outpost Tynes was quiet. "There was just silence for a while," Knollinger said. "There wasn't joking around like there was before." Soldiers talked to each other in quiet voices or kept to themselves. Santos's men felt adrift without him. "They lost their rudder," said Cpt. Jimmy Razuri, the commander of Charlie Company at the time.

Lachance had planned to bring Santos a McDonald's double cheeseburger from Kuwait on the way back from his two weeks of leave. Instead, while he sat in the Atlanta airport, his wife called with the news. Back at the outpost, he found soldiers in Santos's room packing everything to be sent home to Kristen. "I didn't know what to do with myself for a while," he said. He slept in silence. No more late-night



or early-morning knocks on his wall from the adjacent room, Santos summoning him to hang out. He hadn't minded coming back to Afghanistan from leave, knowing he'd see Santos.

Now what? Lachance thought.

On his first patrol after his friend's death, Lachance reached into a pouch on his body armor and pulled out a handful of Jolly Rancher candy, the small pile speckled with green apple candies. His breath caught. He always carried Jolly Ranchers on patrol, and Santos took all the green ones, every time. "Why can't you just take a few?" Lachance would ask him. And Santos would just laugh.

Lachance stuffed the green candy back in the pouch. "I wouldn't touch them," he told me.

Several weeks before, Lachance, a self-trained tattoo artist, had given Santos a tattoo. The words snaked around his right arm: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Beneath

them, the date: 22 November, 2009, when Private First Class Tynes and another soldier in

Charlie Company, Sgt. James Nolen, died. After Santos's death, ten platoon members asked Lachance for a similar tattoo. One now wears the quote on his thigh, another on his bicep, another on his ribs, all followed by 22 March, 2010, and *C.M.S.*, Santos's initials.

The platoon said goodbye to Santos at a memorial service at Combat Outpost Tynes several days after his death. His men filed up to the helmet resting atop a rifle propped between a pair of combat boots. They saluted and knelt and said silent prayers. And while they kept patrolling, they were rattled by the death. "If it happened to him, it could happen to any of us," said Staff Sergeant Rosa. "That was the beginning of the craziness in the Arghandab for us."

**March 22, 2010:
The truck carrying
Santos was
destroyed by
an IED.**

In the coming weeks and months, the platoon was shot at and blown up repeatedly, sometimes several times a day. Spc. Brendan Neenan died June 7 in a blast that wounded four other soldiers. A buried bomb killed Loredó on June 24, and another bomb hit Spc. Christopher Moon on July 6. He died a week later at Landstuhl Re-

throw a luau for the guys after the deployment. She figured he would have wanted her to follow through, and soldiers could share memories with her and the widows of Nolen and Loredó.

On a picnic table in an open-air pavilion, Kristen arranged framed photographs of the platoon's six dead soldiers on small stands and placed a

yellow rose and a shot of Jack Daniel's in front of each. She held the large picture of Santos, standing against a gray concrete wall in Afghanistan, his rifle propped up beside him. "I miss him so much," she told me, and kissed

KRISTEN WAS THERE WHEN HIS SOLDIERS GOT OFF THE PLANE. "I WENT TO ALL THE FLIGHTS TO PROVE TO MYSELF HE WASN'T COMING HOME," SHE SAID.

gional Medical Center in Germany. Of the 42 platoon members, six were killed during the deployment and 14 injured, a casualty rate of nearly 50 percent, high even for frontline troops working in the country's most dangerous areas. By mid-July, the height of fighting season, many in the platoon were convinced their fate would be the same. But Moon's death was the last, and by mid-August, Santos's men had started boarding planes for home.

On September 11, 2010, I grilled chicken wings with Doc Taylor under a gray sky at a park on Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Country music blared from the open doors of his white Chevy pickup truck. Taylor's wife inflated a plastic palm tree as Kristen Santos opened a box of plastic Hawaiian leis. She and Santos had planned to

the photo. "It still doesn't feel real."

Such distance from the battlefields where their loved ones died leaves many family members without a sense of closure. Kristen said it was difficult for Cameron to accept that his dad was gone. He had been away a lot. He'd been deployed over Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas. Now the only difference was Cameron had been told that his dad would never be coming home. Kristen understood. She had last seen her husband on Thanksgiving Day, 2009, when they chatted by video for a few minutes during a rare moment of Internet access. She still couldn't quite believe she'd never see his face again. She welcomed his soldiers home when they stepped off the plane, hoping for some feeling of finality, which eluded her. "I went to all the flights just to prove

to myself he wasn't coming home."

Soldiers wearing Hawaiian shirts arrived with wives, girlfriends, and children, plates of food, and cases of beer. The pavilion filled up, and Captain Razuri stood in front of the memorial table. "Nine years ago today, you know what happened," he told the group. "It's why we're still doing what we're doing today, and why these guys behind me aren't with us."

Later Kristen sat with a half dozen soldiers and looked through pictures from the deployment, many of which she hadn't seen. Santos walking through villages, filling sandbags at Combat Outpost Tynes, drinking tea with the Afghan police, handing out stockings for Christmas. Kristen laughed and reached toward the laptop computer screen, as though to touch him. And then the pictures changed, from shots of a grinning Santos to soldiers standing on a dirt road, next to a truck flipped on its side, scorched by flame, two wheels blown off. The laughter stopped, and Knollinger and Rosa traded nervous glances with other soldiers. "I need to see this," Kristen told them. She leaned closer to the screen and stared at the pictures. "Is that the truck? I need to see where it happened. I need this."

Kristen and the soldiers told stories about Santos and, one by one, his men sat for a few moments and wrote on the big framed picture she had brought. By day's end, the border around the photo was crowded with messages to their fallen leader.

I want you to know you changed my life and I love you for that. The world will never be the same without you. But I will be the man I told you I would. I love you, Dad. Till we meet again.

Doc Taylor

Dad, I can't even describe what it was like to work for you. I learned so much and matured because of you. You were awesome to work for and truly a great friend. I love you and think about you every day. Miss you.

Sgt. Dale Knollinger

You were the quiet professional. Thank you so much for your guidance. You have no idea how much you are missed. Goodbye, Brother.

Sgt. Brian Flannery

I've never been closer to another man. You were a great friend. Until we meet again, you will be thought of every day.

Sgt. Adam Lachance

That night, after Kristen packed up the leftovers and pulled down the decorations, she and Cameron returned to their small brick house on Fort Bragg, crowded with pictures of her husband. Cameron retreated to his bedroom to play video games, as he had often done with his father and now did alone. Beside him on the bed lay the framed picture, adorned with the memories of the men his father left behind. ■

IPAD EXTRA To watch an exclusive video tribute to Sergeant Santos, download the *Reader's Digest* magazine app from the iTunes store.