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LANCE CPL. JOSHUA H. BIRCHFIELD

Town honors fallen Marine

Crowd packs Westville gymnasium to salute veteran killed in Afghanistan

BY JAMES D. WOLF JR.
Post-Tribune correspondent

WESTVILLE — More than 1,000 filled the Westville High School gym to pay their respects to Marine Lance Cpl. Joshua H. Birchfield on Saturday.

Many also traveled from the standing-room-only funeral service to his gravesite, waiting in heavy snowfall and sharp winds while final words were spoken.

After presenting his family with the triangular-folded U.S. flag and giving them the slow and deliberate salute customary at military funerals, Birchfield's fellow Marines approached the coffin. Most had braved the cold in dress uniform, and now they knelt, bowed heads or rapped in respect on the coffin lid.

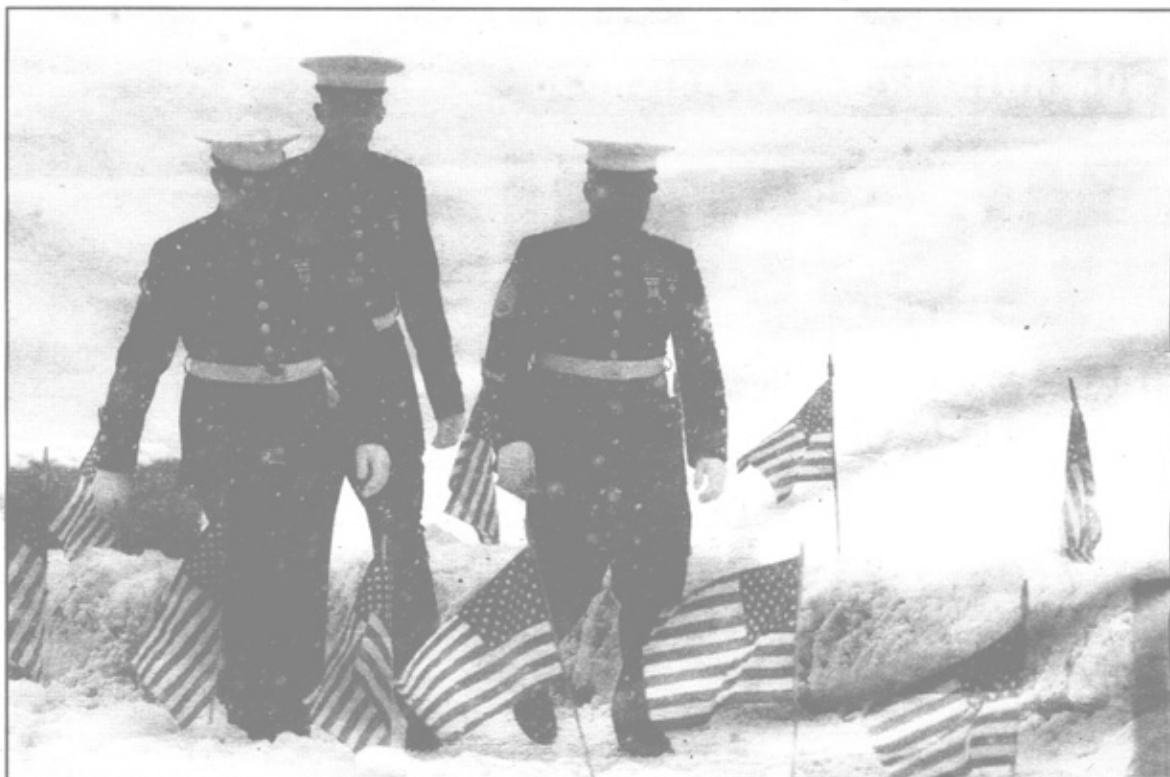
And some of those who stood steadfast and stoic as Birchfield's final honor guard, then shed tears for their fellow Marine.

Birchfield, 24, of Westville, was killed in Afghanistan on Feb. 19. He was on his first deployment with the Marines, fighting enemy force while on patrol in Helmand province, when he was killed by small arms fire, according to a Marine Corps press release.

A 2004 graduate of Westville High School, he joined the Marines in 2008 because he felt it was a right thing to do, according to speakers at his funeral. Birchfield served with the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, I Marine Expeditionary Force, based out of Twentynine Palms, Calif.

The town's support for a fallen son was evident by the business signs honoring Birchfield, the flag firetrucks strung over U.S. 421 and the people in Westville High School's gym from all walks of life in LaPorte County.

The crowd attending the funeral fell immediately silent when notes



Members of the U.S. Marine Corps Honor Guard walk under heavy snowfall Saturday as they leave the burial for Marine Lance Cpl. Joshua Birchfield at Pinhook Cemetery near Westville. STEPHANIE DOWELL/POST-TRIBUNE PHOTOS

of a tuning bagpipe sounded, and silence remained until the service started.

The service began with reading of people's remembrances, followed by a fellow Marine who struggled to read a poem without choking up. A representative of Gov. Mitch Daniels presented the family with three triangular-folded flags. U.S. Rep. Joe Donnelley, D-South Bend, read the commemoration he made for Birchfield in Congress, now permanently part of the Congressional Record.

Donnelley also said that when he visited Afghanistan, the faces of men like Birchfield represented freedom and hope to the people.

And the efforts of Birchfield and his fellow soldiers meant that the Afghanistan flag flew over the one-time Taliban stronghold for the first time in 10 years, Donnelly said.

