

Tradition and Service: Jordan L. Bear

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As a proud member of the Denver, Colorado indigenous community, Jordan L. Bear has had an incredible impact on both his country and community. Bear served as a paratrooper in the Afghanistan War for the United States Army for seven years before he was killed in action at his base in Afghanistan at the young age of 25¹. He is remembered as a loving son, brother, and father.

Bear was born on June 7th, 1986¹. He grew up in Denver, Colorado and was raised primarily by his mother, Cathleen Bear. He was one of three boys in the Bear family. He had an older brother named Jacob and a younger brother named Joshua. The boys attended Denver Public Schools growing up. Their grandmother, Ida Bear, was also very present in their lives growing up, as she helped to raise Jordan and his brothers².



Figure 1

The family's cultural heritage stemmed from both Italian and Native American roots. Bear's father was of Italian descent, but he did not live with the Bears for much of their childhood³. Bear's mother's side of the family was American Indian. His grandmother, Ida, was born on a Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) reservation in Nebraska². When she was young, she was relocated to a Native American Boarding School in California. At the time this was a federal government policy which required Indian children to be educated away from their home reservation with the goal of replacing traditional American Indian ways of life with those of 'mainstream' white American culture⁴. Ida later married Logan Bear, who was also Native American, officially recognized as Omaha and Ponca. Logan Bear served in the military as well and the couple moved to Denver where they had

three children, including Jordan's mother².

Jordan attended John F. Kennedy High School in Denver. He played on his high school football team, and was remembered as a hard worker who stayed out of trouble⁵. Jacob, his brother, remembers looking up to Jordan growing up⁵. According to his mom, Cathleen, he was called Sluggo by everyone because he looked like the character in the old "Nancy and Sluggo" cartoon strip⁵. Ida, his grandmother, was very involved in both the Denver Native American community, and her local Catholic church, the Church of All Saints⁶. She raised her children and grandchildren with this in mind and as a result, Jordan was well-known within the Denver Indian community⁵. In 2001, amidst tension surrounding the annual Columbus Day parade, Jordan and his older brother were asked by a reporter from the Denver Post about their stance³. The boys were divided because on one side, many people, many of Italian descent, supported the parade. This group believed in the right to honor Columbus, someone revered as an important part of Italian heritage. On the other side of the conflict, however, was a group which did not feel that Columbus, a man responsible for the deaths of countless indigenous peoples, should be honored. Opponents of the parade, many of which were Chicano and Native Americans, were hoping for a "spiritual march" to replace the parade. Jordan and his brother, being of both Italian and Native American descent, were naturally confused about the situation and the boys spoke out about hoping both sides would be able to work together for a solution³. Small actions such as these represent Jordan's sense of discipline throughout high school and his care for family and community.

Jordan graduated from high school in the summer of 2004, and immediately enlisted in the military in September of that year⁵. He was the third generation of the Bear family to serve in the military⁵. Jordan completed One Station Unit Training and the Basic Airborne Course at Fort Benning in Georgia⁷. In 2005, he was assigned to Fort Bragg in North Carolina where he was assigned to B Company, 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division. He deployed with the 82nd Airborne Division three times in support of Operation Enduring Freedom⁷.

Operation Enduring Freedom officially began with allied airstrikes in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11th of that year⁸. The terrorist attacks were linked to a group known as al Qaeda, which operated under the protection of the Taliban regime⁹. Operation Enduring Freedom was launched with the goal of preventing the Taliban from continuing to provide a safe haven to al Qaeda in Afghanistan⁹. Forces in Afghanistan fought against the Taliban insurgency, as well as the corrupt Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, and Afghan Border Police⁸.

Bear was first deployed to Afghanistan in February of 2007⁷. By this point in the war, Turkey, Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and several other NATO forces had agreed to send troops to Afghanistan⁹. When Bear arrived in Afghanistan, there were already about 50,000 US and NATO troops there⁹. His first deployment lasted until April of 2008. He was then deployed again, a year later, in August of 2009⁷. At the end of that year, with an increase in US troops announced by President Obama, there was a total of about 100,000 U.S. troops and 40,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan⁹. Bears second deployment lasted until July of 2010. About a year later, on May 2, 2011 al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed by US Forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan⁹. The violence continued in Afghanistan however, and Bears time there was not finished.

About a year after returning from his second deployment, in the summer of 2011, Jordan married a woman named Sarah⁵. In the following December they had a son, whom they named Kayden Bear. This was his second child. He had a daughter three years earlier named Kailee Holbrook. Sarah and his children reside in Elton, Wisconsin¹⁰.

In 2012, Bear went on his third deployment to Afghanistan. He was stationed on an Afghan-NATO base in South Kandahar province⁷. In February of that year, reports that Qurans were burned at Bagram Airbase, a US military base in Afghanistan, led to violent protests⁹. In retaliation to these reports, several members of the Afghan National Army at Bear's base turned their weapons on his unit¹¹. Army officials told Jordan's mother that he had been trying to lift a wounded soldier who had fallen next to him when he was shot and killed¹². Bear and one other infantryman, Spc. Payton Jones, were killed in the attack on March 1, 2012. After Bear's death, Capt. Cecil Wolberton, the Commander of Company B remarked, "Staff Sgt. Bear set the example for all the squad leaders in his Platoon. He was a phenomenal leader and beloved by the men he led."⁷

During his time in service, Bear was awarded the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the NATO Medal, the Army Commendation Medal with one oak leaf cluster, the Army Good Conduct Medal with one oak leaf cluster,

the National Defense Service Medal, the Afghanistan Campaign Medal with 3 combat stars, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, the Army Service Ribbon, the Overseas Service Ribbon with numeral 3, the Combat Infantryman's Badge and the Parachutist Badge⁷.

His service as an American Indian is an important part of who he was as well. Native Americans have a long history of serving in the United States armed forces and, according to the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian, "in recent decades, they have served at a higher rate in proportion to their population than any other ethnic group."¹³ In the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian men and women continue to serve in our armed forces in high numbers¹⁴. According to the Smithsonian, of the current 1.2 million servicemen and women, 24,000 of these are Native Americans¹⁴. This is a fascinating statistic, given the complicated relationship that Indigenous people have had with the U.S. government. From colonization and genocide, to the intentional suppression of Native culture and forced relocation of Natives from their homelands onto reservations, it is hard to understand why so many would choose to serve and sacrifice their lives – like Bear did – for this country. The Smithsonian explains that it is oftentimes because service in the armed forces is considered a continuation of the warrior role in traditional Native culture¹³. Servicemen and women are often some of the most honored community members in Native American communities as well¹³. Looking at the Bear family, this is clear. As a third-generation soldier, Jordan and his family respected his path as a soldier. In the end however, for many American Indians, their choice to serve their country comes down to protecting their homeland and families – just like it would for any other soldier. For many, it is the love of home and country that drives them to serve their country¹³.

Bear was loved and honored by many. Representative Reid Ribble of Wisconsin remarked, "Staff Sergeant Bear embodied the best qualities of a true American soldier. He served this country with honor and exhibited profound bravery and selflessness. Staff Sergeant Bear was a loving son, a devoted father and now he will forever be known as an American hero. He is remembered by friends and family as a man with a courageous and strong spirit who earned the unwavering respect of his peers."⁷ Bear is buried at Fort Logan National Cemetery. At the time of his death, his daughter was 4 years old and his son was 2 months old. The gravity of his loss was clear at his funeral as his family and friends gathered for a four-day wake where a fire burned for the wake's entirety. This is a native American tradition said to carry his family's prayers to Bear in the smoke. Rituals like this are often used today by Native communities who continue traditions that either help returning veterans heal or as in Jordan's case, help those who died overseas

find their way in the afterlife¹⁵. The week after Bear's death, Governor John Hickenlooper of Colorado ordered the flags to be lowered to half-staff on all public buildings statewide to honor his service¹⁶. Jordan was and is a true hero, not only to his friends and family, but to his community and country as well.

Operation Enduring Freedom officially ended two years after Bear's death on December 28, 2014⁸. The Operation lasted thirteen years. According to the Department of Defense, 2,347 soldiers died while serving in Operation Enduring Freedom¹⁷. Another 20,153 were injured¹⁷. Jordan L. Bear was among these brave men who sacrificed their lives so that the people of Afghanistan could have the opportunity to live in freedom, and so that their family at home could live safe from terrorism.

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