

A Heritage of Honor

On a balmy, late summer day, Dustin Rouse, like most students at West Florence High School, was having a little trouble getting back into the swing of a new school year. But it was his senior year and while he was looking forward to graduation, he was still undecided about what to do next.

Daydreaming through his first period class, Dustin thought to himself that he should be paying a little more attention to his studies if he was planning on going to college. And at this particular moment, he regretted not completing the assigned reading for Biology.

“I wish I could drop this stupid class! Maybe if I slump down in my desk, he won’t ask me any questions about the reading I didn’t finish last night. If only I didn’t need a science credit . . . I’m never gonna use this stuff anyway! I’m so glad Mom’s signing me out early today! I can’t believe it’s only the third week of school. It’s gonna be one, long senior year!”

“I really need to talk to Mom about the National Guard thing. She’s probably gonna freak! Oh, well! I guess I can explain it all to her before Dad comes by to talk about the paperwork we have to sign before I can join.”

Around 9:30 AM, the class was interrupted by an announcement on the school’s intercom system. The principal’s voice sounded odd and strangely distracted. Faltering and hesitant, he made the announcement that commercial jets had flown into both towers of the World Trade Center and government officials suspected it might be the work of terrorists.

The entire class was confused and stunned. They really didn’t understand what was happening. Between classes, one of Dustin’s friends got permission for Dustin’s mom to sign him out, too.

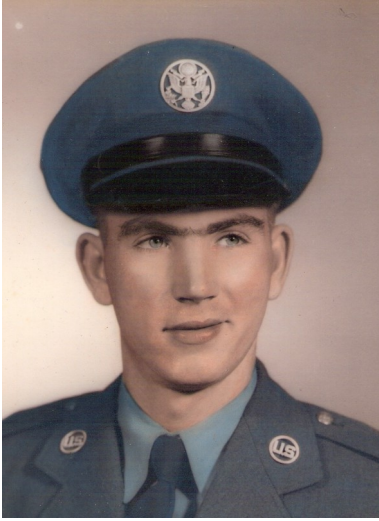
By early afternoon when Dustin was signed out early, the too-cool, 17-year-old would have never admitted it, but he was glad to see the familiar face of his mom. And she resisted the urge to hug him in front of his friend.

For several months, Dustin had been thinking about the opportunities that came with military service. Since his dad William Rouse and brother, Bo Rouse, were both full-time, National Guard recruiters, the topic came up frequently. Dustin didn’t think he wanted a full-time military career, but joining the reserves sounded like a good way to make some extra money and help pay for college. After all, he could join now with both parents’ permission and go for basic training after he graduated. And the possibility of a signing bonus made enlisting sound even more appealing. But now, after all that had happened on September 11, 2001, he just wasn’t sure . . .

The day’s plans quickly derailed. Today was definitely not the day for Dustin to talk to his mom about joining the National Guard. With his friend in tow, Dustin and his mom ran some errands and went home to watch the news. As the day went by and details of the attacks unfolded, Dustin’s thoughts kept going back to what he had planned to do today. His friend stayed for dinner, and throughout the meal, the conversation rambled from sympathy for the families affected to outrage at the people behind the attacks. And intermittently, there was talk of impending war. By the time he went to bed that night, Dustin knew he wanted to join the National Guard. And he wanted to do it for all the right reasons. Less than two weeks later, he signed his enlistment papers.

Dustin completed basic training in 2003 and continued to serve in the South Carolina National Guard reserves. In February 2009, units from Andrews, Conway, Georgetown, and Hemingway were notified that their units would be called up in the coming months for a tour of duty in Afghanistan. However, none of those units had enough eligible soldiers, so other South Carolina units were asked to recruit volunteers. When the Dillon unit asked, Dustin volunteered to fight for his country’s freedoms. On January 6, 2010, Dustin left South Carolina for intensive training on a U.S. military base and his deployment to Afghanistan 30 to 45 days later.

It’s not surprising that Dustin felt a sense of duty to serve his country. He comes from a long line of military men, and not one of them ever discouraged military service. In fact, they all agreed that life in the armed services had been good careers for them.



Tommy Rouse, Dustin's grandfather, served 20 years in the Air Force and joined for much the same reasons as his grandson.

"When I was a teenager, the country was assisting the South Korean Republic in a police action," says the elder Rouse. "The country had instituted the draft, and like many of my buddies, I had dropped out of high school."

In Highlands County, Florida, where Tommy registered for the draft, high school dropouts were moved to the top of the list. "I'd always wanted to fly planes, so before they had a chance to draft me, I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force," said Tommy. Due to the G.I. Bill, Tommy was able to attend Florence-Darlington Technical College after his retirement and has an Associate's Degree in Civil Engineering.

Dustin's dad, William Rouse, retired from full-time service in 2008 after 22 years in the National Guard. Retiring as Sergeant First Class, William now teaches Junior ROTC at Aynor High School.

Unlike his sons and father, William was a little older when he joined the military. "Many of my friends were in the National Guard and had been talking to me for a while about joining," says William. "Because my dad was in the Air Force, I had always thought of a military career, but my life took a different turn. Later, at a time in my life when I needed a change, the National Guard seemed like a great opportunity, so I enlisted when I was almost 30 years old."

Although William has not fought in a war or traveled overseas, he says service in the National Guard has presented him with two of the most memorable moments of his life. "As a full-time recruiter, I had the honor to be present when both my sons took an oath to serve our country, just as my father had been there when I was sworn in. Those kinds of memories are hard to come by."

Dustin's older brother Bo also joined the South Carolina National Guard soon after high school. Now a Staff Sergeant based at the Dillon Armory. He has been in the Guard for 13 years, and says he likes the idea of knowing he can retire at the age of 40 and begin another career.

"I'm not in any hurry to leave the military," says Bo. "But not many men my age can look forward to drawing a good retirement income while still being young enough to try other things. I have absolutely no regrets about my decision to make the military a full-time career."

All four men say that the toughest part of military service, even if you are not deployed or fighting a war, is the time you spend away from your family.

"Whether you are in the reserves or have a full-time position and regardless of whether you serve in peace time or during a time of war," says Bo, "Men in the armed services make a huge contribution to the welfare of our country. Out-of-state training is a way of life for a soldier and even reservists are taken away from their families to help with natural disasters for weeks, sometimes months, on end," Bo continues, noting that both he and Dustin did four weeks of border patrol in Phoenix, AZ a few years ago.

While Dustin is just now beginning what will be his longest mission thus far, he feels being away from home will be a little easier for him than it might be for some others because of his family's





legacy of military service and due to the strong support he has from family and friends back home.

“I think a lot about how much my family will worry when they have no idea where I will be or what I’m going to be doing at any given time,” says Dustin. “I’m not married, but I do have a girlfriend at home and my family is very important to me. I’m going to miss seeing my niece and nephew especially. They are both so young (Brennyn is 3 1/2 and Johnson is 17 months old), and little kids change a lot in a year. I’m hoping they will remember me when I get home.”

With so many detractors of the war, the Rouse men are united in their views on the fight against terrorism.

“The fight against terrorism isn’t limited to Afghanistan,” remarks Tommy. “I believe we have to accelerate our efforts to defeat terrorism throughout the world.”

“We have to stay the course,” says William, “and possibly step up our efforts. I believe that as Americans, we should always be willing to take on any fight that threatens our way of life.”

“While there have been bumps along the way—certainly no system is perfect—I believe our government has to be commended for limiting attacks here at home,” continues William. “Yes, there are areas that need work, but I firmly believe that our leaders are doing all they can to support the military in this fight.”

“We are all so proud of Dustin,” said his big brother. “But it sure was hard to see him go. I have mixed emotions—on the one hand, I am proud of him for stepping up to serve his country, but another part of me feels sad that I’m not going with him.”

Dustin’s dad says he couldn’t be prouder, but his pride is tinged with sorrow. “I watched my daddy leave for Vietnam twice. I have one son who wishes he was going and another who will soon be fighting on foreign soil.”

“I am so proud of him,” says Dustin’s PaPa Tommy, “But if it were possible, I would take his place, and I know that William and Bo feel the same. All we can do is support him, along with the thousands of other men and women fighting to secure our freedoms, and pray that he returns home with a sense of pride knowing that he has made one of the greatest sacrifices he can make.”