

The Son of My Heart
Jan. 27 1984 - Aug. 11, 2004

As most of you know, for the last 20 years Diane and Michael have been part of our family and for much of that time, part of our household. My wife, Chris, has always been "Aunt Chris" - his 'second Mother'. And me? To Michael, I was always "Dad". This could be confusing to school authorities and new friends, because I wasn't legally his father, step-father, foster-father, grand-father or anything else you could write in the "relationship" box. I was "Dad". I was there when Chris and Diane brought Michael home from the hospital. I have changed his diapers, corrected his table manners, blessed him for countless bedtimes, paddled his bottom, delighted in his jokes. I was there, overwhelmed with pride, when he graduated Tar Heel Challenge, and when he stood with Nate and Brennan Clifford at Fort Benning, GA. at the Ranger Memorial and pledged these words:

Recognizing that I volunteered as a Ranger, fully knowing the hazards of my chosen profession, I will always endeavor to uphold the prestige, honor, and "esprit de corps" of the Ranger Regiment.

I was with Diane in Seattle last week when we said "Goodbye" to Michael and surrendered him to his Heavenly Father's care. In every way I knew to be, I was Michael's Dad. He was the son of my heart. I loved him his whole life, and love him still.

One of the more common observations about Michael is "you had to love him". Most of us here know exactly what I mean. We realized early that Michael was one of those kids who learn by experience. Describing consequences wasn't too effective - Michael generally preferred to find out first hand. Now, it didn't help that, in my sons, he had 7 older brothers to help get him into trouble, and 4 or 5 sisters to make sure we knew about it. A good example happened when Michael was 9 or 10. We had just purchased a full-grown cow with an impressive set of horns. We had to corral her for a few days because she was aggressive, upset by being moved, and was threatening anyone who tried to restrain her. Guess who decided to play "bull-fighter", complete with a red towel? We found Michael in the pen, with the cow, waving the towel. By God's grace, it was a cow rather than a bull, and Dexter's are a fairly docile breed, but .. You had to love him. Michael loved "Gotcha's" He would tell the most amazing stories with a straight face, most of them the product of his impish brain, but just when you thought you had caught him, you would find out that this story was true. Gotcha! He could be exasperating, undependable, and he took hair-raising risks. He was also loving and generous to a fault, without a malicious bone in his body. He was steadfastly loyal to his family, his friends, his fellow soldiers, and his country. He wasn't a whiner or complainer. Just when you were ready to punch him he would crack some joke and make you laugh. You had to love him.

In 1987 I started backpacking the Appalachian trail with my sons. As Sgt. Bamman alluded, Michael joined the gang in 1991 when he was 7 and hiked with me each summer until Tar Heel Challenge and the Army claimed his time. On those hikes we would be doing anywhere from 100-150 miles each year, some 10-15 miles per day on what is arguably the most difficult long-distance trek in the world. For years, as the youngest, Michael was most often bringing up the rear with me, so I spent a lot of time watching his sturdy little legs trotting along in front of me, taking two steps for every one of mine, looking something like an energetic turtle out for a walk. His trail name was "Stinky" or "Stinkleberry" – possibly having to do with the fact that while on the trail he pretty much completely ignored hygiene. Before visiting a town Tim or Ben would take him to the nearest creek for a trail-bath to ease community embarrassment, but it was really a lost cause. As he grew older and stronger, and I older and slower, I was bringing up the rear alone, and I would spend hours, sometimes, with the boys somewhere up ahead. To not lose each other over these long stretches, we had a rule: wait at the roads, and so that I wouldn't get too far behind on long climbs we had another: Wait at the top. This is from our trail diary for July 9th, 1999, when Dan, Ben, and Michael were with me:

"Checoah Bald lived up to its reputation. I wasn't sure I was going to make it, but just at the point I was thinking about camping right in the trail for a few hours, I reached the top where the boys were waiting for me. From there it was only another mile to the shelter".

This year I was hiking alone: all my sons and daughters now have their own trails to follow, as it should be. Two weeks ago, on August 7th I climbed Mt. Katahdin in Maine and finally finished the Appalachian Trail. I was probably still on the mountain when, 3000 miles away, Michael suffered the crash that would end his life 4 days later. Despite our lost hopes, our grief, our sorrow, our questions, I cannot escape the coincidence of these events. Our merciful God wants me to know that Michael is just up the trail a ways, waiting for me, as he so often has, on top of the mountain. When I get there, it will be just a little ways to shelter and home.

To all of you who have stood with Diane and our family during this time I want you to know that it is God's love, expressed through you, that has sustained us, comforted us, and demonstrated that, in Christ, we have victory over death. You have been Him, and without you we would surely have been overcome. We can only be humbly grateful, and rejoice in Michael's life, now eternal with Jesus.

May God bless you all.