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On this Veterans Day, the only easy day was yesterday

Navy SEAL John Connors never took the easy path, whether it was confronting bullies, dictators, or injustice

When John Connors was growing up in Scituate, there was a small, awkward boy with glasses in his class named Billy.

Because of his slight build and unorthodox manner, Billy was relentlessly bullied.

“John hated bullies,” his mother, Joan Connors, recalled. “John always stood up for Billy, against the other bullies and in one case, even, a teacher at Gates Junior High.”

That teacher was so embarrassed and angry that John had called her out in front of the class for teasing Billy that she berated Joan Connors over the phone and wrote a malevolent letter to Boston College High School, trying to thwart John’s efforts to enroll there.

“The letter didn’t work,” Joan Connors said. “BC High gave John a scholarship.”

BC High’s generosity toward John Connors didn’t stop him from trying to blow the whistle on a teacher there, the [Rev. James Talbot, who was raping and molesting BC High students](#), including some of John’s teammates on the soccer team, which Talbot coached.

“He picked up on Talbot, because John was very astute and aware, and again, Talbot was a bully, and John simply would not tolerate bullies,” Joan Connors said. “John told one of the other priests about Talbot, but they didn’t remove Talbot.”

Talbot threw John off the soccer team in retaliation for John implicating him in the abuse of other boys. Not for the first time, adults did not live up to John Connors’s ethical and moral standards.

Talbot was quietly shipped off to a Catholic high school in Maine, where he continued to rape boys before finally landing in prison, while Connors went on to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, from where he intended to join the Marines upon graduation. But he heard about an elite unit in the Navy, the SEALs, and in doing so found his calling. He was commissioned as a Navy Ensign in the Naval ROTC program at Holy Cross after graduating from WPI.

In 1989, Lieutenant [John Patrick Connors](#) was a platoon leader for SEAL Team 4, which, with SEAL Team 2, had slipped into Panama to capture General Manuel Noriega, the military dictator and former CIA asset who ruined his country and was under indictment in the United States for drug trafficking.

Connors had been undergoing medical treatment for an infection when he learned of the mission, [Operation Just Cause](#), but signed himself out of treatment so he could lead his platoon.

A firefight erupted at the airfield where Noriega kept a Lear jet to escape, and, according to the Navy account of the battle, Connors braved enemy fire to lead his squad in a counterattack to suppress Noriega's gunmen. He was providing covering fire so his wounded SEAL teammates could be evacuated when he was shot and killed, along with three other SEALs.

"His heroic leadership saved lives and helped minimize further casualties," the Navy citation for a posthumous Silver Star medal reads.

Connors was 25 years old.

"It was devastating," Joan Connors said. "John was so young, so strong, so committed to helping others. And, just like that, he was gone."

There were 18 priests and a cardinal on the altar and 600 people in the pews at St. Agnes Church in Arlington for his funeral.

If it was crushing to say goodbye to Connors 36 years ago, there were some who refused to consign his legacy to the grave with him.

All these years later, it is not just his mother who fondly remembers him. His friends from college, from the military, from all walks of life are determined that his memory, his life story of service and sacrifice, is writ large.

For the last five years, they have raised money and consciousness to raise a [statue in Connors' memory](#) on Lawson Common in Scituate. The statue, sculpted by the Charlotte, N.C.,-based artist [Chas Fagan](#) and scheduled to be unveiled next year, will honor not just Connors but all veterans of modern warfare.

"John was a scholar, a warrior, a defender of the weak, a role model," said Tom Cappelletti, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who was Connors's classmate at WPI and is the executive director of the memorial project. "He was a chemical engineer, he spoke four languages, and he was an elite warrior. A true Renaissance man."

John Sheehan and Connors befriended each other on their first day at BC High. Sheehan said Connors was a quiet leader who never sought praise.

"He was not a superhuman that people could not relate to," Sheehan said. "Just an incredible force of will with a sense of moral justice, regardless of race, color, or creed. John had off-the-charts mental toughness, but he was a huge softy for the underdog. He tutored kids in the Columbia Point housing project, and I think one of the things that attracted him to the military was the ability to right wrongs."

Joan Connors, now 91 and living in Arlington, is grateful that her son's friends have worked so hard to keep his memory alive.

As for the statue, she said: “The Holy Spirit is in charge. I just hope I’m still around when they unveil the statue.”

It would be fitting that, at Veterans Day and Memorial Day commemorations in the future, people from all over the South Shore and beyond gather at a statue dedicated to someone who died in the service of not just his country but also those living under the heel of a foreign dictator.

Connors died trying to rid the world of a dictator who was a bully, just like that teacher in Scituate, just like that predatory priest at BC High.

He could have taken the easy path in life, but that wasn’t how John Connors rolled. He, as much as anybody, embodied the SEALs motto: The only easy day was yesterday.

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