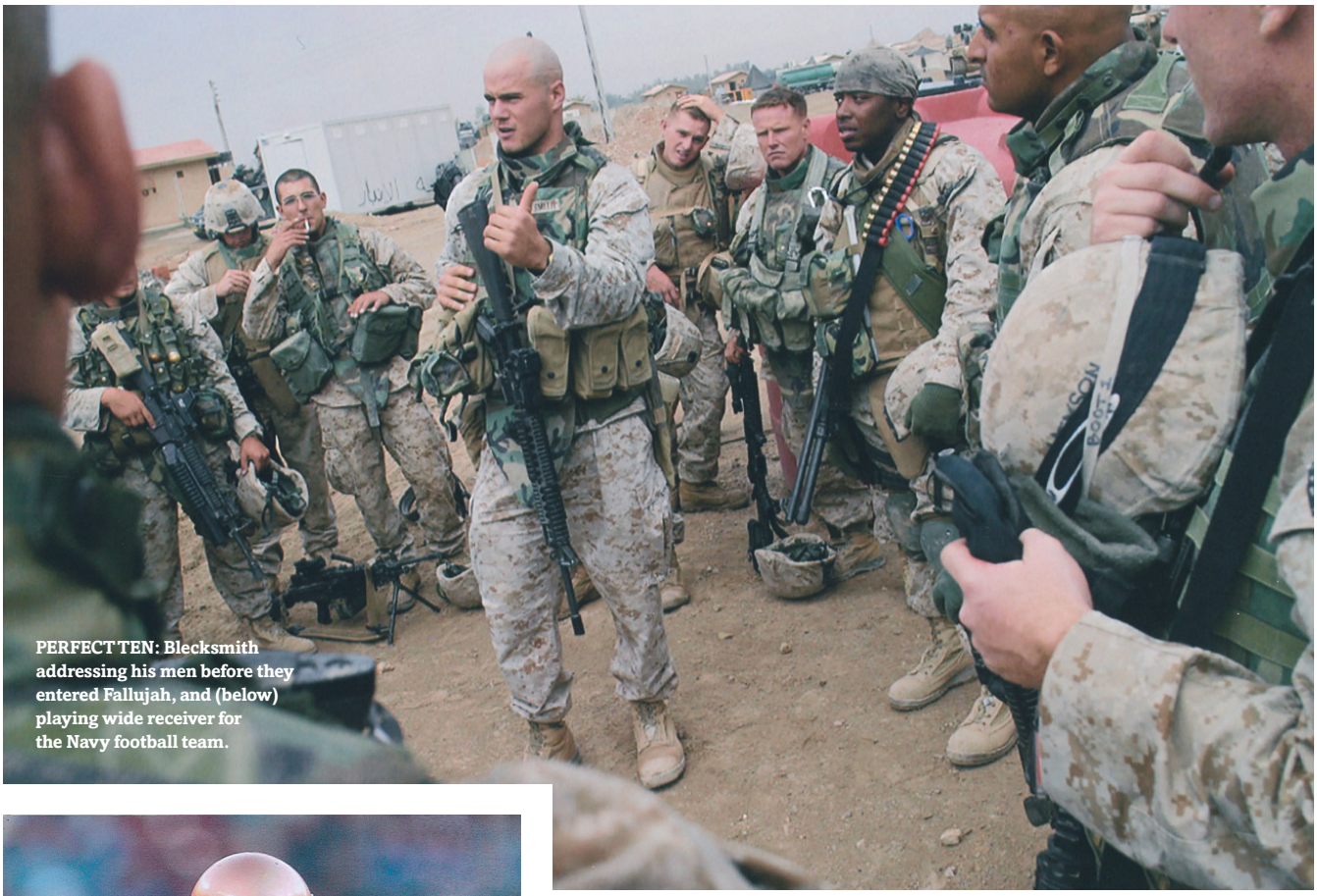
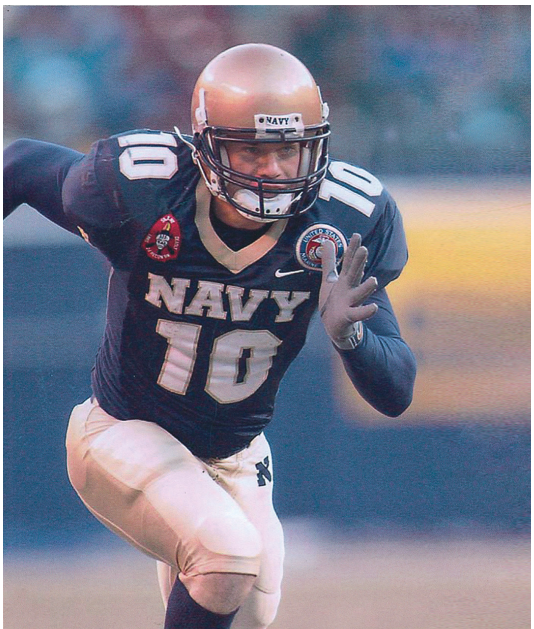
# 2nd Lieutenant JP Blecksmith, 24

Handsome, talented, and privileged, JP Blecksmith joined the military possessed by a burning desire to serve his country. He died on a rooftop in Fallujah in November 2004.

**By Jeff Gordinier**



**PERFECT TEN: Blecksmith addressing his men before they entered Fallujah, and (below) playing wide receiver for the Navy football team.**




**ON THE NIGHT BEFORE 2ND LIEUTENANT JP BLECKSMITH SHIPPED OUT TO IRAQ,** after his family took him out for dinner in Newport Beach, California, his older brother, Alex, picked up a pair of clippers and shaved JP's head. When that was done and JP looked ready for combat, Alex gave his brother a hug. Then Alex climbed into JP's green Ford Expedition and drove it north, back to the family's house in San Marino, weeping part of the way. He had a feeling. So did his parents. A premonition. They didn't talk about it much, but two months later, in November 2004, when JP joined a wave of U.S. Marines roaring into the city of Fallujah as part of Operation Phantom Fury, the feeling intensified. ¶ On the night of November 10, Blecksmith and his closest friend in Iraq, Lieutenant Sven Jensen, slept on a rooftop in Fallujah. It was, miraculously, a quiet night, and chilly. They got a decent night's sleep. They awoke just before sunrise and were amused to find a

small pet bird with green wings and a yellow belly perched a couple of feet away from their faces. Jensen took a picture of the bird. There were other ones like it all over Iraq, because when U.S. troops were searching abandoned houses, they often found cages that had been left behind. The soldiers let the birds go free so they wouldn't starve to death.

Hours before, JP had sent a letter to his girlfriend, addressing it formally, as always, to "Ms. Emily M. Tait." In it he wrote, "By the time you receive this, you will know we have gone into the city. We've been preparing for it the last few days, and my guys are ready for the fight, and I'm ready to lead them. It'll be hectic, and there will be some things out of my control, but the promise of you waiting at home for me is inspiring and a relief." Now he was in the thick of it. Blecksmith and Jensen came down from the roof, ate their MREs for breakfast, and got their orders. Before the invasion the battalion commander, Colonel Patrick Malay, had given his men an analogy: "'Imagine a dirty, filthy windowpane that has not been cleaned in hundreds of years,'" he recalls saying. "That's how we looked at the city of Fallujah. Our job was to scrub the heck out of that city, and then take a squeegee and wipe it off so that it was clean and pure." Most of Fallujah was empty, and anyone left in the city was presumed to be an insurgent.

Blecksmith and the other members of the India Company of the Third Battalion, Fifth Marines Regiment, moved south through the city, with their blood types scrawled in indelible marker on the sleeves of their uniforms. The streets smelled terrible—a stubborn aroma of rotting food and bodies. Late in the day on November 11, things started to go wrong. A marine in Blecksmith's platoon, Klayton South, was shot in the mouth by an insurgent when he kicked open the door of a house. Blood gushed from his mangled teeth and tongue. The medics cut into South's throat to give him an emergency tracheotomy. (He survived. He's since had more than 40 operations to repair the damage.) "It shook the platoon up," Jensen says now, "and JP was the most in-control person I saw. He had a sector to clear, so he rallied his guys and said, 'Okay, we've got to continue clearing.'" Blecksmith's and Jensen's platoons moved off in different directions, and the two friends shot each other a glance. "I'll never forget looking at his eyes the last time I saw him," Jensen says. "He turned and he gave me almost an apprehensive look, like, *Oh, shit, we've got some shit going on.* I wanted to say 'Hey, I'll see you later.' But I didn't say anything to him."

Minutes later, Blecksmith led his platoon into a house and climbed a flight of stairs to the roof to survey the surrounding landscape. Shots came from a building across the street. Blecksmith stood up to direct the squads under his command, shouting at them to take aim at the enemy nest. He was tall, and was now visible above the protective wall. "He was up front a lot, and he made a big target, and we'd talked to him about that," Colonel Malay says. "He exposed himself consistently to enemy fire in the execution of his duties. He displayed a fearlessness to the point that we had to talk to him about the fact that nobody is bulletproof."

As Blecksmith stood on the roof, a sniper's 7.62-mm bullet found one of the places on his body where he was vulnerable. It was a spot on his left shoulder, less than an inch above the rim of his protective breastplate. The bullet sliced downward diagonally, coming to rest in his right hip, and along the way it tore through his heart. "I'm hit," Blecksmith said. He fell. He raised his head for a moment, and that was it. A Navy medic got to Blecksmith immediately, but he was already dead, and his men carried his heavy body back down the stairs. He was 24.

That night in San Marino, Alex Blecksmith came home from work and noticed that the house was dark. He opened the front door and saw his mother, Pam, sitting at the kitchen table with a couple of marines in dress blues and white gloves, and he heard the phrase *We regret to inform you . . .*

The funeral was so magnificent, so full of pageantry, that at times it was difficult for Alex to remember that the guy being buried was his brother. The Marines do it right when it comes to honoring the fallen. They do it so right that you can get swept up in the ceremony and feel as though you're watching a parade. The funeral took place at the Church of Our Saviour in San Gabriel—the church where the most celebrated of San Marino's favorite sons, General George S. Patton, had been baptized as a baby. As the flag-draped casket was carried out of the sanctuary and into the California sun, a long, silent line of almost 2,000 people followed. There were marines and midshipmen and local firefighters in uniform. There was a 21-gun salute. Four World War II fighter planes swooped toward the cemetery in the "missing man" formation—just as they passed over the funeral, the fourth plane symbolically split from the quartet and veered into the sky. A bagpiper played a Scottish dirge. One of JP's old friends would later observe that the day, in all of its

**BROTHERS IN ARMS: JP Blecksmith and his older brother Alex, as children (left) and before JP shipped out to Iraq (center). Alex and his sister Christina McGovern describe their brother as a connoisseur of sashimi, German beer, and electronic music. "For lack of a better term," Alex says, "he was sort of a cultured meathead." Right, Lieutenant Blecksmith chats with his girlfriend, Emily Tait, a few hours before he boarded a plane to fly from California to Iraq.**

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE BLECKSMITH FAMILY.

glory and pomp, made him think of Princess Diana's wedding.

AS PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE WAR in Iraq wavers, it's easy to forget that people like JP Blecksmith even exist. The American military is so predominantly blue-collar that we tend to assume that the sons and daughters of the rich never voluntarily die in warfare anymore. Blecksmith was born in September 1980, just weeks before his state's own Ronald Reagan was elected president, and he spent most of his youth in the small Los Angeles County town of San Marino during what felt, for many of its wealthy and conservative inhabitants, like something of a *Leave It to Beaver* golden age. To look at a photograph of him, blue-eyed and suntanned and grinning, is to understand the enduring magnetism of the word *California*. He stood six foot three and weighed 225 pounds. His chest was a keg; his biceps were gourds. His biography reads as though it were scripted by a Hollywood publicist: legendary quarterback on the Flintridge Prep football team, track star, graduate of the United States Naval Academy.

His father, Ed Blecksmith, who is 64, runs an executive-recruiting firm in Los Angeles. He and Pam met in the early seventies, while both were working in the White House. Along a wall leading into their kitchen hang framed Christmas cards from Dick and Pat Nixon. "Here's a kid," Ed says, "who didn't need to do this." It's as though JP were transplanted into our world from the Eisenhower years. Somehow, in an ironic age of Jon Stewart and *South Park*, the guy grew up in a kind of pre–Summer of Love bubble in which young men of strength and valor still yearned to distinguish themselves on the battlefield. He was groomed, in a sense, for something that no longer exists, at least not for guys who grow up in the wealthiest zip codes in the country. He believed in ideals of duty and sacrifice that have become, for many men, anachronistic and even unfathomable.

"I was in awe," says Peter Twist, Blecksmith's closest friend since preschool. Twist played wide receiver to Blecksmith's quarterback on the Flintridge Prep football team; a local newspaper called the duo "Fire & Ice." Blecksmith was known for being fast, composed, smart, and unflappable, and his giant arms could propel the ball a good 80 yards down the field. If he had an athletic flaw, it was that he was aware of his own flawlessness. "He had such personal confidence," says Tom Fry, a mentor to Blecksmith in high school and one of the assistant coaches on his team. "He felt that if all the stars aligned, there was nothing he couldn't do—it was JP's world." When they graduated in 1999, Twist and a couple other teammates went off to the University of Arizona, where it's safe to say the prospect of partying was on their minds, while Blecksmith opted for the rigors and restrictions of Annapolis. "I was stoked for the man," says Twist, 26, who lives in Newport Beach and works in the mortgage business. "Most of us are still trying to figure it out, but JP always had a goal."

November 11, the date on which JP Blecksmith died, was noteworthy for other reasons: It's Twist's birthday. It also happens to be the birthday of General Patton, who grew up in San Marino and holds a prominent place in the town's history. This coincidence has only bolstered the mythology of JP Blecksmith—a feeling that it was his destiny to die in combat. The Blecksmiths have a statue of Patton on a shelf in their home, and it becomes clear in conversation that Ed, a decorated Vietnam veteran himself, sees a kind of mystical link between the fate of his son and the military triumphs of the legendary general (who was a passionate believer, it just so happens, in reincarnation).

Indeed, JP Blecksmith fit the "hero" mold in such classic, square-jawed American style that a kind of cult of JP has begun to develop in San Marino. They give out awards in his name at the local schools. On the Fourth of July, San Marino hosts a JP Blecksmith 5K run. A Marine Corps training center in Pasadena has been christened Blecksmith Hall. On a hot Sunday morning this past August, Alex parked his brother's Expedition in the cemetery and walked across the grass to the pale granite stone that says JAMES PATRICK BLECKSMITH. An elderly man wandered over to the headstone, hand in hand with a grade-school kid who had a blond Mohawk, and told Alex, "I never met JP, but I go by here and show my grandson his grave."

THREE YEARS AFTER BLECKSMITH'S death, his bedroom still looks the way it did when he left for Annapolis in 1999. There's a Green Bay Packers poster over the bed, a dense forest of athletic trophies, toy race cars lined up on the dresser. "This is all his stuff from Iraq that they sent over," Alex says, looking down at a cardboard box on the floor. "We haven't gone through it, really."

Ed Blecksmith walks into the bedroom, and within a few seconds his voice is cracking and his blue eyes are growing wet. "It's still tough," he says. "You see all these pictures and things . . ." He insists on sitting down in front of the TV downstairs and watching DVD footage of that magnificent funeral, fighting back a sob at the moment when one of the eulogists, a Navy SEAL, describes JP as having been "the best of the best." Ed has some Fox News footage, too. In it, you can see JP speaking to his men hours before the battle in Fallujah, and that's where you get a brief glimpse of the regular guy behind the mythology. Because there stands JP, in fatigues and a floppy Boonie hat, holding a map, telling his marines to "expect everything you can possibly imagine." When he looks at the camera for a moment, he's smiling. ■

**AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN: Before he went to Iraq, Blecksmith took a trip to Hawaii with Tait. When Blecksmith flew her back east for the Naval Academy ball, he set Tait up with a hair appointment. In his hometown of San Marino, California, local schools give out awards in his name.**