

The Short, Heroic Life of Thomas Doerflinger

Written by Austin Ruse and Cathy Cleaver Ruse
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COMMENTARY & OPINION AUSTIN RUSE AND CATHY CLEAVER RUSE

The Stryker armored personnel carrier holds nine soldiers and two crew members.

The Stryker is heavy - 38 tons - and covered in armor. Most of us will never sit in one, but we can imagine climbing in, hot and cramped, and heading into hostile territory. The relative quiet that we might experience in this large and rumbling vehicle would likely give way to the sound of bullets beginning to nick the armor. They come faster now, and stronger, as we near our destination. Explosions rock the Stryker. It has no windows, so we cannot see our attackers. Our shirts are drenched, hearts pounding. The Stryker jerks to a stop.

On Nov. 11 Thomas Doerflinger jumped out of that vehicle in a hostile town called Mosul . American and Iraqi forces had invaded the terrorist stronghold of Fallujah, the place of beheadings south of Baghdad . Other terrorists took this opportunity to invade Mosul 's police stations which were inadequately guarded by Iraqi security forces that promptly ran away.

These would be Thomas Doerflinger's last moments on earth.

His high school teacher said he did not understand why a young man with such a vibrant intellect chose the Army instead of college. His girlfriend tried to talk him out of it. After the funeral, a woman was overheard saying, "What a wasted life."

But when Thomas Doerflinger was confirmed in the Catholic Church, he took the name Maximilian Kolbe.

No one takes the name of Kolbe just because he founded the Knights of the Immaculata. Or because he started what became the largest religious magazine in Poland . Anyone who takes Kolbe's name does so because at a time in the world when courage mattered most, Kolbe did not hesitate. He offered himself up to the Auschwitz starvation bunker in exchange for a man with a family. You take the name of Kolbe because you hold self-sacrifice and the love of fellow man in the highest regard.

Childhood dreams of bravery can fade quickly as other things intrude and we begin to desire comfort and ease. In their Christian home, Thomas's parents taught him a different dynamic.

His father is the esteemed bioethics expert attached to the Pro-Life Secretariat of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. His mother teaches natural family planning. He witnessed his parents stand up for human dignity every day without wavering, no matter how strong the

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cultural tide moved against them.

His father says Thomas joined the Army to make a difference. He desired not a life of ease and comfort but one of struggle and sacrifice. He went to Iraq with the knowledge that he was helping others achieve freedom. He did not have to go.

Nor did he have to go to Mosul on Nov. 11. Thomas Doerflinger's own Stryker awaited repair, and he had no obligation to join another group of soldiers on their mission. Still, he joined them and met a sniper's bullet.

Was his a wasted life? Someone's life was saved that day because of Thomas. We may never know in whose place he stood and fell. For his bravery, the Army awarded him the Bronze Star.

Surely we agree with those who say that 20 is too young to die. But isn't a life of 80 years too short for those who seek little but comfort and ease?

In high school, Thomas was known to be a quiet person. He joined a Catholic social club, and on one memorable occasion set aside his characteristic reserve to join a discussion about the mystery of time. That day he spoke and, according to his teacher, dazzled the group with his explanation of St. Augustine 's notion of eternity and its relationship with time. Even then this young man knew something about the meaning of time and eternity.

It is not surprising that Thomas Doerflinger's decisions perplex many around him.

We live in an age not of men, but of boys. When an actual man appears in our midst, he may seem strange, incomprehensible. When he is a Christian gentleman who becomes a hero, we may be altogether flummoxed.

Yet here one walked among us.

Like others before him, Thomas Maximillian Kolbe Doerflinger fell. But in falling, he showed the greatest love, that of dying for his friends. The remains of this Christian gentleman now lie in the cold earth, yet he stands far nearer the beatific vision than we do.

Cathy Cleaver Ruse is director of planning and information for the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities at U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Austin Ruse is president of the Culture of Life Foundation and Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute.