

An Airman in a Storm

By Autumn A. Arnett



Photos courtesy of the Wassom family



Left: Wassom, as a Guard loadmaster instructor, could have avoided deployment. He chose not to. Center: Wassom and his daughters, Sydney (l) and Lorelai (r). Right: Wassom in Iraq. This is his mother's favorite picture of him.

MSgt. Bud Wassom gave his life protecting his daughters from a deadly tornado.



One year ago, MSgt. Daniel R. “Bud” Wassom II died in the line of duty.

His was not a combat-related death but a tragedy related to his duty as a father and a family man.

On April 27, 2014, at approximately 8 p.m., tornado warning sirens sounded in Vilonia, Ark., a sound not totally foreign for that part of the country. Dan Wassom’s mother, Pamela Wassom, said, “You don’t really expect to get hit” when the sirens go off. In fact, she sometimes liked to go outside and look at the clouds and see what was coming her way.

But on this particular day, Dan Wassom’s house was, in fact, about to be hit by a deadly tornado. With the twister bearing down on their home, he and his wife, Suzanne, grabbed their young daughters, seven-year-old Sydney and five-year-old Lorelai, and went to the safest part of the house, before throwing themselves over the girls to shield them from the storm. What happened next was a blur, and the family can only speculate on the exact series of events.

“The girls told me that they could hear [the tornado] in the kitchen, they could hear mommy’s dishes breaking,” said Pam Wassom. “And then they said the house exploded. We’re figuring that, of course, it ripped the roof off

the house and it sent stuff everywhere, flying debris, and whatnot. We’re assuming that when the roof got ripped off the house, it may have picked [Dan] and Lorelai up a little bit, because they were moved.”

Suzanne Wassom later told Dan’s mother that, despite the chaos, Dan was calm and reassured the family as the tornado first began tearing apart their home. He did what he could to shield Lorelai with his own body.

Nine minutes after the tornado hit, it was over. “With winds reaching nearly 200 miles per hour, the devastating EF-4 tornado smashed into Vilonia, Ark., April 27, 2014, killing 16 people,” the Air Force summarized in its “Profiles in Courage” tribute to Wassom, published Feb. 4, 2015. “The twister demolished 50 of 56 homes in



the Wassom's subdivision, as well as nearly half the businesses in the town of 3,800."

Wassom was found slumped over, face down with a piece of wood through his chest. His mother said it was likely a structural beam that had come crashing down on top of him, "and that probably killed him instantly." His wife returned to his side after taking the girls to safety, but her husband was already dead. Lorelai suffered a serious right shoulder injury and lost a toe on her left foot—but she survived.

The family and the entire community at Little Rock AFB, Ark., was hit hard by the loss of a man who, by all accounts, was an exemplary father and airman. His mother recounted that more than 1,500 people attended his funeral, with little room for folks even to stand.

A loadmaster instructor with the 189th Airlift Wing, Wassom had left a mark on everyone he'd encountered. "He was your picture-perfect airman," said Col. Robert A. Ator II, commander of the 189th Airlift Wing and previously Wassom's squadron commander.

"Every airman from the beginning of time has, when approaching a stressful situation, rolling into combat for the first time, ... always [said] a silent little prayer, like, 'Please, God, don't let me screw this up,'" Ator said. "As parents, we would do anything for our kids. ... But what Dan did, very selflessly, when the chips were down, [was] exactly what we'd all hope to do. So when asking the question of 'Please, God, don't let me screw this up,' Dan

was the guy who answered that question and said, 'I won't.' Dan was that guy. He answered the question and he passed the test."

WILLING TO GO

Wassom joined the Air National Guard right after 9/11, following in the footsteps of his father, who is a retired C-130 crew chief and who still works at Little Rock Air Force Base as a contractor and had enjoyed an office a few minutes away from his son's. "We're a big Air Force family," said Pam Wassom. Already armed with a bachelor's degree, Dan "could have been an officer; ... however, he just chose to stay being an enlisted guy, and that's what he wanted to do, and that's what he loved," his mother said. She added that her children were raised in the "God, family, country" tradition.

Wassom's younger cousin (raised as a sibling) has already joined the Air Force, and another plans to do the same after school. His sister's husband is also an airman.

Dan dove right in as an airman. "What to me was striking was that he joined the unit knowing full well what the upcoming fight, with 9/11 and all that" would entail, said Ator. As a Guard loadmaster instructor, Wassom was technically exempt from deploying, but he said he could not in good conscience teach things he was not willing to live himself.

"He said he couldn't... teach his students to go and do if he wasn't willing to go over himself," his mother recalled. And so Wassom deployed twice for Operation

Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. "That was something that was very, very important to him, not only from a service standpoint, but more than that, in teaching the school, he wanted to have credibility with his [students]. If [they] were out there fighting and getting shot at, he wanted to go get shot at and understand what they were going through," Ator said.

Back in Arkansas, Wassom helped stand up a "traveling road show" training program for other loadmasters, said Ator. "There's a requirement for every loadmaster to be able to, every year, ... go to loadmaster refresher training. And usually that's done where we have the simulator stationed, and ... every loadmaster would have to travel for that school. What we did is, we put together a training team of two loadmasters and we would go to a wing and get a whole wing banged out with just only traveling two guys," the wing commander said. "Dan was right in the middle of standing that whole thing up, so he progressed very quickly in his qualifications as a loadmaster and he was just generally a leader within the section."

Wassom was "highly respected" by others in the unit, Ator said. "If you met Dan once, it was like he's an old friend. He's one of those guys who always walked around with a smile on his face, always upbeat. Nothing seemed to get him too riled up. One of those guys who's just one of those solid dudes that you would want to spend your time with. He made everyone around him better just because of his attitude and his outlook on life."

Wassom's wife of some 10 years, Suzanne, doesn't like to talk to the media



and has since moved her family to the West Coast, away from “tornado alley,” to try to move on from the tragedy, according to Ator.

“The girls had little issues. Every time there’s a storm, ... they’d get a little upset,” he said of Lorelai and Sydney. He said the squadron shared their grief.

“One of the challenges after Dan’s passing was to make sure that we’re taking care of each other and being good, resilient airmen for each other and being good wingmen—on top of that trying to take care of Suzanne and the girls, making sure that we’re still connected,” he said.

The person who has gone “all-in on supporting Suzanne and the girls” is TSgt. Brian Swanson, one of Wassom’s best friends in the unit. “Brian and he, honestly—they were like brothers. They did everything together. Their families did everything together,” said Ator. “Brian was one of the guys ... I was most worried about right afterwards.”

Pam Wassom chuckled as she described the relationship between her son—affectionately known to his family as Bud—and Swanson. “He was pranking Brian for four years, and Brian would confide in him, and ... he didn’t figure out it was Bud who was pranking him until [after] he died,” she said.

“Brian got the job of cleaning Bud’s filing cabinet out at work, after Bud died, and that’s when he found out Bud was pranking him all that time. There was a file folder of bumper stickers. ... He would put these on Brian’s car to see how long it took Brian to figure out it was there.”

Playing pranks was just one example of Wassom’s sense of humor and jovial, upbeat nature.

When he was alive and in how he died, Wassom exemplified what service means and Air Force core values, his coworkers say.

Wassom earned posthumous awards that are still piling up. First, there was the naming of a road that runs through Little Rock Air Force Base, an idea conceived by Ator and the section loadmasters.

“They wanted to do something, and they started talking about wanting to name our auditorium where we brief our students every morning” after him, Ator said. “I thought, ‘That’s just a little too small,’ in the sense that it’s not just an operations guy. He’s a wing member, and everyone in this wing felt his presence when he was here and lamented his passing.” The airmen wanted to find a way to do something bigger.

REMINDER OF HIS LEGACY

Ator said he approached the base commander, who said they could “absolutely” move forward with the renaming. “Every day, we turn onto this street and it’s a constant reminder to us of what his legacy is and a constant reminder to us of the call to service and sacrifice. ... It’s a constant reminder to us of who he was and what he stood for,” Ator commented.

Wassom has been posthumously awarded the Airman’s Medal, bestowed for a heroic act, usually at the voluntary risk of life but not involving actual combat. He has also received the Meritorious Service Medal and the Arkansas Distinguished Service Medal.

Left: A subdivision in Vilonia, Ark., after a tornado leveled it on April 27, 2014. Wassom, 31 years old, died in the storm. Center: Pam and Dan Wassom and the street sign commemorating their son’s heroism. Right: ANG Director Lt. Gen. Stanley Clarke presents the Airman’s Medal to Wassom’s wife, Suzanne, on Dec. 6, 2014.

Ator said Army Gen. Frank J. Grass, chief of the National Guard Bureau, was the one who started the conversation about the Airman’s Medal for Wassom. “I will tell you, everyone in the entire leadership chain, General Grass, [ANG Director Lt. Gen. Stanley E. Clarke III], they all called us. I talked to them pretty much the day after it occurred, and it was General Grass who brought it up first,” Ator said.

In February, Wassom was also honored at the Air Force’s annual Portraits in Courage ceremony in Arlington, Va.

CMSAF James A. Cody told the audience of his admiration for Wassom “who, while not in combat, still faced insurmountable odds” in the face of “an unprecedented tornado in Arkansas,” where “the whole world was coming unhinged around him.”

Cody said Wassom’s actions that day displayed “a different kind of courage than going in the face of an enemy.” This was, in its unexpected way, representative of what the United States Air Force is all about.

“He had such a beautiful house and he had a beautiful life. A beautiful family. Everything was going so great for him, and then it gets wiped out in like two seconds,” Wassom’s mother said. “We’re just grateful that he was our son; he was such a good person, he influenced so many people.”