

GOD, FAMILY, COUNTRY, AIRPLANES: Friends, family mourn loss of Ohio Air National Guard pilot

A memorial display consisting of LtCol Kevin Sonnenberg's restored Pontiac Trans-Am (from left), John Deere tractors, classic Ford F-100 pick-up truck and a mini F-16 fighter aircraft from the 180th Fighter Wing stand on his parents' farm.



SRA MATTHEW KING / 180TH COMMUNICATIONS FLIGHT

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MCCLURE—If one can judge a man's greatness by where his devotions lie, then one can say that Lt. Col. Kevin Sonnenberg was truly a great man. His dedication to God, Family, Country and airplanes shaped him into a hero that all can look up to, be inspired by and emulate in everyday life—a hero to be remembered forever.

Sonnenberg, a pilot with the 180th Fighter Wing, Toledo, crashed shortly after takeoff and tragically died on June 15, 2007, while flying his F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft near Balad Air Base, Iraq, shortly after takeoff.

Sonnenberg was one of 350 members of 180th participating in an Air Expeditionary Forces (AEF) deployment. He had just departed on a mission to provide air support to coalition ground forces fighting anti-Iraq forces when the crash occurred, 35 miles north of Baghdad.

"His priorities were like this: God, family, country, airplanes," said his mother, Jean Sonnenberg.

Sonnenberg faithfully worshiped at a small country church in the middle of Henry County's farmland.

"Kevin always said Henry County is God's Country," Jean said. "He's in God's Country now."

On June 26, hundreds of family, friends, unit members and retirees gathered one last time to say goodbye to Sonnenberg at the Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church in rural Deshler, Ohio. The entire church and its basement were filled and additional seating that included a tent area with video screens to view the service was available for hundreds of people attending outside the church.

"He laid down the ultimate sacrifice for his friends and his country. Nothing can be greater than this," said the Rev. Thomas E. Smuda, who presided over the service and who had known Kevin and his family for years.

"He was a terrific son," Jean said. "The worst part of all this is that he just didn't have enough time to spend with his wife."

Kevin and his wife, Lorin Sonnenberg, were married in August 2006.



Sonnenberg

"They were perfect for each other," said Jennifer Miller, Kevin's sister. "They were so in love."

Family members also expressed how devoted Kevin was to his stepson, 6-year-old Carson Orr.

In addition to his deep devotion to his family, Sonnenberg was also dedicated to the military.

"He just loved flying those jets," said Vickie Schulze, one of Kevin's three sisters.

Sonnenberg, a traditional member of the Ohio Air National Guard, was assigned to the 180th in 1990.

"If he knew what would eventually happen to him I'm not sure he would have changed a thing," Miller said. "He still would have been a pilot."

On June 23, family, friends, unit members and retirees came together when Sonnenberg was returned to the 180th Fighter Wing. Formal military honors were paid to Sonnenberg during the ceremony. The pilot had touched so many lives in such a profound way, as described later that weekend by Lt. Col. Tony Iannucci, fighter pilot at the 180th and personal friend of Sonnenberg.

"I can honestly say that Kevin was a man who, when you met him, you considered him a friend," said Iannucci. "He absolutely did not have an enemy in the world."

On June 24-25, family, friends, unit members and retirees paid their respects to Sonnenberg during visitations held at the Rodenberger Funeral Home in Napoleon, Ohio, not far from where Sonnenberg grew up. A slide show presentation including Sonnenberg's childhood, family times, military career and recent wedding was shown, and a collection of Sonnenberg's high school, military and other professional awards also were on hand for friends to remember and reflect upon. Sonnenberg was a 1983 graduate of Napoleon High School, where he was an active athlete, played football and earned several individual awards, including state honors while wrestling for the Wildcats. He attended Bowling Green State University and earned a bachelor's degree in 1987.

In addition to his Air National Guard career, Sonnenberg had been a commercial pilot for Delta Airlines since 2000. He was also an avid farmer and helped maintain 500 acres of wheat, corn and soybeans with his father, Marvin. He will be fondly remembered as a Renaissance man able to maneuver America's most advanced aircraft in a perilous war zone one week and discuss corn and soybean crops with Henry County farmers the next. And he did both with his natural, down-home nature that endeared him to so many. **OG**

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