

# September 11: Attacks Prompted Late Silver Spring Soldier to Join Army

**Spec. Thomas K. Doerflinger died in Iraq at the age of 20. His mother recalls her son's life and the September 11 terrorist attacks that prompted him to join the Army.**

By [Whitney Teal \(Patch Staff\)](#) - September 11, 2012 4:20 am ET

Lee Ann Doerflinger remembers the morning of Sept. 11, 2001 as a normal day in the Silver Spring neighborhood of Colesville—beautiful even. Her second eldest child, Thomas, commuted to Springbrook High School as usual. But by the time the day ended, the young man was resolved to fight terrorism, a decision that would change the trajectory of both of their lives.

Spec. Thomas K. Doerflinger was an active member of the United States Army for two years, from Oct. 2002 to Nov. 2004, when he was killed in Mosul, Iraq at the age of 20. He had entered the country less than four weeks earlier as part of the Stryker Brigade.

Lee Ann recalls that her son was very bright, but didn't make very good grades at Springbrook. He was an excellent writer, and she said that his school papers always flowed well and didn't require much editing. But Thomas lacked direction and wasn't sure that college was for him, even though he'd been accepted to the University of Maryland.

"He saw the Army as a way to learn some discipline," Lee Ann said. "I felt he was drifting [before joining the military] and it was not good for him."

Joining the Army during war time was a risk, "but so was just staying home," she said.

Before Sept. 11, Thomas thought that he might want to go into law enforcement or maybe the military. That day and those attacks "cemented" his desire to become a soldier, his mother said.

After Basic Training, Thomas was stationed in Fort Lewis, WA. His mother says that he began to find direction. He volunteered teaching writing to elementary school kids near the base and even shared his poetry with his students, something he'd never done with his family, Lee Ann said.

Thomas, a quiet and reserved young man, felt that he'd found his calling. He crafted a life plan: finish his five-year contract with the Army, go to college and become an English teacher.

In the fall of 2004 his group was deployed to Mosul, Iraq.

“We were actively engaged in Afghanistan by the time he’d finished high school and went into the Army,” Lee Ann said. “So he knew he’d be going to Iraq or Afghanistan. He was not surprised to be deployed.”

Lee Ann says that he was there for such a short time that Thomas hadn’t yet figured out the time differences. She and her husband were still trying to get on a regular communication schedule with their son when they found out that Thomas had been killed by a sniper’s bullet on Nov. 11, 2004, Veterans Day.

Thomas is survived by his parents, Richard and Lee Ann, older sister Anna and younger siblings Maria and Matthew.

Lee Ann feels a connection to Sept. 11 and the World Trade Center.

“When Thomas was killed in 2004, we just kind of said we’re going away for a weekend and that’s where we went, we went to New York City,” she said.

“We just said we wanted to be there, where it started.”

The following spring, Lee Ann went back with a friend and her family. On a boat tour she passed some of the places that had been devastated by the attacks, including the World Trade Center and a firehouse that had housed many of the fallen firefighters.

“I was just sitting there, crying,” she said. “Because the casualty just went on from Sept. 11. It wasn’t just them; it was the people who had died afterwards.”

In the years since her son’s death, Lee Ann has connected with some of the soldiers that fought with Thomas.

“It gives me hope that they remember Thomas so well and with such affection,” she wrote in a recent email to Patch.

As of 2008, eight Montgomery County [residents have died](#) in Afghanistan or Iraq, including Spec. Thomas Doerflinger.

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