

Sax

Continued from B2

glovers in the direction of an adjoining room, where an autopsy report sits banished to a drawer for eternity.

"I haven't looked at it. I can't look at it," Sax said. "And that's forever. I just don't want to see it."

John became an aviator, just as he told his dad he would. He was a star pilot in the military, tapped for the Marine Corps version of "Top Gun" and heralded by his commanding officer as "a natural in the cockpit, just leaps and bounds above his peers in terms of his progression."

Capt John J. Sax died with four other Marines when the aircraft he was co-piloting malfunctioned and crashed into a remote Southern California desert on June 8, 2022.

The son Steve Sax had now parted with so many of his baseball treasures is that he had dreamed of one day giving them to his son. Instead, he holds tight only to all the gifts John gave him.

"He was my hero," Sax said.

That is why Sax is here now, alternating between tears and laughter, between happy memories and debilitating grief, as he embarks on his mission to honor John's life.

Larger than life'

If the military operated like the major leagues, John Sax might have won Rookie of the Year, too.

"He walked into the room and was just larger than life," Lt. Col. John Miller recalled by phone. "I see a lot of Marine officers check in. He was just different right from the get-go. His personality, his ability to communicate, his motivation, his excitement — full of energy."

Miller serves as the commanding officer for the "Purple Foxes," a squadron based at the Marine Corps Air Station Camp Pendleton (San Diego County).

The unit's colorful history dates back to the Vietnam War when, Miller said, an infantry battalion was under heavy fire during the battle for Khe Sanh in 1968 and needed an emergency resupply. The Purple Foxes heard the distress calls and immediately launched, resupplying the Marines and prompting one of the grateful men to reply: "You were the only ones that gave a

s — about us."

The line became an enduring motto. "Give a s — lives on in the Purple Foxes culture. It's painted onto aircraft and imprinted on shoulder patches."

It was in this rough-and-tumble culture that John Sax, the failed Little League outfielder, became a franchise player. He was especially adept at maneuvering the MV-22B Osprey, an aircraft that combines the agility of a helicopter with the speed of a turboprop. The Marines use the Osprey as an assault support aircraft.

It was John Sax's favorite mode of travel.

"He loved it," Miller said. "It was designed to take off and land like a helicopter, so you don't really need a runway, but to fly in air-planes mode at higher altitudes and much faster air speeds than a typical helicopter."

Flying in the military had long been John's goal, but it took a while for Uncle Sam to welcome him aboard. The Navy rejected John because of a shattered elbow suffered during a skinboarding accident (Dr. Neal Eliafrache, the famed Dodgers surgeon, handled the repairs.) John was later derailed by astigmatism, which also required surgery.

But John never considered a Plan B.

"Whatever it took, it didn't matter," Steve said. "It was amazing to me how driven he just was, even as a young boy. Nothing was going to get in his way. Nothing."

Along the way, John earned a degree in aeronautical science at Embury-Riddle and amassed flying experience. Once he had the hang of things, he even took his mom for a spin. Debbie and Steve split when John was young, but they remain on good terms. They have an older daughter, Lauren Ashley, who is 37.

John took Debbie up in 2015 in a Cessna 172, a single-engine plane known as the Skyhawk.

Once they reached cruising altitude, John turned to her and said, "Mom, do you want to see what I've learned?" She was thrown by the question. They were already flying. This was what he'd learned, right?

Then her John stalled the plane, nose-dived for a spell and calmly pulled out of the stall. "Then he looks over at me and he goes, 'Don't tell my instructor I just did that,'" Debbie said with a laugh.

A man of few words

Steve Sax had a much different relationship with his own father, John Thomas Sax who was a Montana-born truck driver who lived life as if on a word count. He didn't say much of anything. Specific phrases such as "I'm sorry" or "I love you" never escaped his larynx.

"He was like John Wayne," Sax said. "My dad was not a talker. He was a doer."

But his dad's no-nonsense gruffness pulled Sax from the abyss during the lowest point of his career. In 1983, the infielder suddenly found himself incapable of making routine throws to first base. His version of the baseball yips became so bad that it's now known as "Steve Sax Syndrome." He made 30 errors that season, and his throws were so wildly erratic that some smart-aleck fans along the first-base line at Dodger Stadium started wearing helmets.

"I had 26 errors at the break," Sax recalled. "People make that in a career. I had 26 at the break."

Less remembered is that Sax worked his way out of it. He overcame his throwing woes and finished in the National League's top five for fielding percentage every year from 1986-1988, then led the American League in '89 with the Yankees.

"I did Thank you for remembering!" Sax said, laughing. "But I was going to tell you anyway."

What was the cure for Steve Sax Syndrome? His stern father, John, told Steve that the only escape was to get his confidence back, and the only way to do that was to practice manically until he felt like himself again.

Then, in a rare moment of vulnerability for John Sax, he confided to Steve that he had the exact same issue as a young player, and that's how he got out of it once upon a time.

"So I thought, 'Wow! If Dad can go through this, then, of course, it will work,'" Sax said. "So I took his advice, went through practice and got my confidence back one day at a time. Eventually, I took that confidence into the game — and the thing was gone."

That tough-love lesson was the last conversation Sax ever had with his father. John died on June 10, 1983 at age 47.

It was several more years before Steve learned, to his delight, that Dad had conked him. Steve was

reminiscing with his mom, Nancy, about how Dad's willingness to open up about his throwing struggles saved his career. "And my mom whispers, 'Your dad never had a throwing problem,'" Sax said.

He smiled. His parents had known each other since the fifth grade.

"He just told me that because he knew how much I revered his power and strength. And I got over it because I thought, 'Well if he went through it ... But he never went through it!'"

The rest of Sax's career was more fun, especially in 1988. He kicked off that magical year by belting a homer as the Dodgers' first batter of the season. And by October, he was in the on-deck circle for Kirk Gibson's classic home run against the A's Dennis Eckersley in Game 1 of the World Series.

Lesser remembered, except for in this room, is that the biggest highlight for Sax that season happened in that sweet spot between Opening Day and the Fall Classic.

On Aug. 15 of that year, John Sax was born.

A military mishap

On the worst day of their lives, the news came in ominous echoes. Lauren invited her mom and dad over for dinner. Debbie got there first, just in time to read a text from Rich Ward, the family friend who had taken John on that life-changing flight. The message was something about a military mishap at Camp Pendleton.

"He didn't say crash," Debbie said. "He said, 'There was an incident with an Osprey.'" Debbie called John's cellphone and it went straight to voicemail. She checked with John's wife, Amber, who hadn't heard from him. Rich told them not to worry about the silence, noting that the military often goes into a communication lockdown if something goes haywire.

Debbie wasn't yet worried, though by the time Steve's car rolled up to the house, she at least fretted over the rest of the squadron. Steve was also unfazed; military pilots are hardly the most reachable people. Unreturned phone calls and texts were the norm.

He recalls going to bed at 9 p.m. Ten minutes later he heard a knock at the door.

There was a Marine in full dress on his doorstep.

"I knew right away," Sax said. Recounting this part of the story, Sax went quiet for several moments. This is the pattern. When talking about the crash, Sax's words often trailed off. He would start sentences with a full head of steam before running into a wall of grief.

Then, after a few beats of silence, he would push through. He did not fight tears; he embraced them. Among the few worthwhile condolences Sax received after the accident was when a nun told him: "Grief is the price you pay for loving someone."

It took a full military investigation over the next 10 months, but the family got a full accounting of what happened that day. Capt. John Sax and four other Marines were returning from a training mission at low altitude in a clear and sunny afternoon. John had a lunch date scheduled with his wife within the hour. He and Amber had a daughter who was not quite 2 years old, and a second child would be born on Sept. 19.

'A catastrophic mechanical failure'

What happened next would later be categorized as "a catastrophic mechanical failure." The Osprey suffered "a hard clutch engagement," which is when the clutch that connects the Osprey's rotor gearbox to its engine slips. As detailed by the Defense News, the Osprey should immediately transfer the power load from the damaged engine to a second operational one. In this case, though, the power transfer blew out that engine, too. There is no third engine.

"It fell," Steve Sax said, "like a rock out of the sky." He even knows the moment of impact: 12:14 p.m. and 18 seconds.

The four other service members who perished that day were Cpl. Nathan E. Carlson, 21, of Winnebago, Ill.; Capt. Nicholas P. Losapio, 31, of Rockingham, N.H.; Cpl. Seth D. Rasmussen, 21, of Buffalo, Wyo.; and Lance Cpl. Evan A. Strickland, 19, of Valencia, N.M.

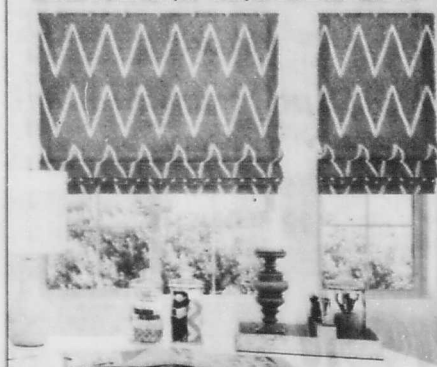
The official report following the military investigation stated, "There was nothing the crew of the SWIFT 11 could have done to anticipate or prevent this aviation mishap."

By SAJ, 85



3DAYBLINDS®
YOU'LL LOVE THE TREATMENT

CUSTOM BLINDS, SHADES, SHUTTERS & DRAPERY



BUY ONE
GET ONE **50% OFF**
on Custom Blinds, Shades & Drapery

CALL TO SCHEDULE
FREE in-home design consultation
with no obligation!
877-760-2030



WE DESIGN, WE MEASURE, WE INSTALL, YOU RELAX!®

*Offer valid on 3 Day Blinds® products only, excluding shutters and special orders. Buy 1 qualifying window covering and receive the 2nd qualifying window covering of equal or lesser value at 50% off. Offer excludes installation, sales tax, shipping and handling. Not valid on previous purchases or with any other offer or discount. Offer Code 50OFF. Expires 12/31/24. State, Contractor and Home Improvement Licenses: Arizona 121054, California 100386, Connecticut 01-364849, New Jersey 3104910200, Oregon 153886, Pennsylvania 153776, Tennessee 00222, Washington 1041001421. County, county, Nevada County, NV 401770320, Boulder County, NV 401770320. Contacted through: Dealer Window Services, LLC. Expires 12/31/2024. See Dealer 877-760-2030. Ignite City, Arizona. Available upon Request. © 2024 3 Day Blinds LLC.

Did you know the U.S. is considering a digital dollar system?

Downside of a Digital Dollar

The FREE report

reviews possible risks for IRA/401(k) savers: privacy, government control, cybersecurity.

Get informed and be prepared.

Order the report TODAY!

385-462-4880