



Do you know someone whose story epitomizes the Aggie Spirit and Texas A&M's core values? Let us know by e-mailing TexasAggie@AggieNetwork.com.

AGGIE MYSTORY

Return With Honor

By Stephanie Jeter '06

USMC Cpl. Chris Esselburn '08 with Lance Cpl. Mike Korzeneiwski during Esselburn's second tour in Iraq. "I felt like the Corps and the University had entrusted me to represent them in Iraq," Chris says. "I didn't want to betray or dishonor that trust."



Chris Esselburn '08 has very good posture—shoulders back, spine straight, hands in lap. Though he was sitting, the back of his plastic chair remained scarcely used throughout the conversation.

Pulled from a corner in Duncan Dining Hall, maybe it was there for the next person to recline in, for someone

less disciplined, someone who needed to rest. Esselburn, it seemed, didn't fit in either category.

He'd been sitting for a while. Before the chair, it was in his truck, and before the truck, it was in a plane. Before the plane, he'd been in Iraq on his second tour.

There was a lot of celebration for

the Ohio Marine after his return to the States in March 2008. He'd called his father, **Tom Esselburn '81**, first. "Hi, Dad. I'm in Maryland," Tom remembered. The elder Esselburn was at a gas station when his cell phone rang. It was the same day George Bush came through the Shreve, Ohio, area, the Esselburns' hometown. The day already



(From left) Kelly Esselburn, Tom Esselburn '81, Chris Esselburn '08 and Nathan Esselburn '09 at the arches on the Quad in 2008. The words "Return With Honor" had a special meaning for Chris during his deployment to Iraq, as he wore a ring with the phrase engraved on it.

had a buzz about it, but it was nothing near the call from his son, nothing near having him back home.

Esselburn's bus to home base in Erie was greeted by a cheering crowd. The local police department escorted the bus right between two fire engines with their ladders outstretched. An American flag hung from the highest point, almost brushing the top of the bus, he said. The Stars and Stripes had never seemed so large.

Esselburn had been welcomed. His mom's banana bread had been served, and he'd slept in his own bed. But it hadn't felt complete until he was back in College Station.

College Station is where his senior boots were.

College Station is where his new Aggie Ring belongs.

He had earned his Ring before he left. Ninety-five hours completed toward his degree in agricultural economics, the Ring was shipped to his parents' home. They understand its importance.

Esselburn is a Ross Volunteer, second generation after his father. Esselburn's brother, **Nathan '09**, holds a spot in the respected Corps of Cadets unit, too, and his other brother, **Justin '12**, is a sophomore in the Corps. Though their mother, Kelly, may not be an Aggie by record, "you might as well call her one," Esselburn said. She taught her five children how to sing *The Spirit of Aggieland*. "She taught us to sing it off key," Nathan teased.

When Esselburn's Aggie Ring came in the mail, his parents took a picture. They e-mailed it to him in Iraq with the message "Return with honor."

That had been Esselburn's watch phrase for a while. It's chiseled in the bricks that make up the arches in the Quad. It's engraved in a ring he wore while in Iraq. Knowing he had earned his Aggie Ring but couldn't wear it, Esselburn purchased a sterling silver band two weeks before flying to Iraq as a sort of substitute Aggie Ring. "As I left for Iraq, I wanted to make sure I returned with the same honor I had,"

he said. Esselburn wore the band every day. He took it off when he finally put his Aggie Ring on.

He wore his senior boots for the first time at the Corps of Cadet's Final Review 2007. They're just a few pieces of leather stitched together to fit his foot, but with them back on, he was back home. He had returned with honor.

One of his Squadron 18 buddies kept them on campus. "I told him I'd be back. I wanted them to stay in Aggieland," Esselburn said.

It was a Tuesday when he was released from formation with his Marine unit in Ohio. By Wednesday he was in formation in College Station with Squadron 16. He had his boots. He had his Aggie Ring.

"It's great to be an Aggie. It's great to be in Aggieland."

Editor's Note: This story first appeared on AggieNetwork.com in May 2008. Chris graduated in May 2009 and is now a staff member for the U.S House of Representatives Agriculture Committee. 🌾