

AL-ASAD, Iraq (March 18) – In the desert chill, on the lonely nighttime roads of Iraq, Joe Johnson looks out over his machine gun and thinks of Justin. It was on Easter morning 2004 that a chaplain and a colonel appeared on Joe and Jan Johnson's Georgia doorstep with the news.

Justin, the boy Joe had fished and hunted with, the soldier son who'd gone off to Iraq a month earlier, was suddenly dead at 22, killed by a roadside bomb planted in a Baghdad slum.

Today it's Joe who mans the M-240 atop a Humvee, warily watching the sides of the road, an unlikely Army corporal at 48, a father who came here for revenge, a Christian missionary on a crusade against Islam, and a man who, after six months at war, is ready to go home.

"I shouldn't even have come," he now says. And if he leaves bloody Iraq with no blood on his hands, he says, that's fine, too.

The Johnson family story is unique, even strange. But in a war where soldiers have heard an ever-changing medley of reasons for fighting, Joe Johnson's may be as simple and direct as any – and to many, as troubling.

He wasn't there that day the tragic news arrived in Rome, Ga. Instead, the self-employed house-builder was in Fort Lewis, Wash., trying to qualify for a place in a Washington National Guard unit ticketed for Iraq.

With six years of long-ago Army and Navy service, Johnson had joined the National Guard in 2003, wanting to serve his country again, this time in combat, and to go to Iraq while his son was there. A year with both husband and son at war would be easier on Jan than two years separately, he reasoned.

The death of Justin, a 1st Cavalry Division machine gunner, stunned his parents with a shock that lingers still.

"What were the odds, of thousands of people here, that somebody in my family would get killed?" the grieving father asked.

At that point, Johnson said, "I decided it was too soon to leave home." Jan was too distraught.

But last April 11, a year and a day after his son was killed, Johnson told his Iraq-bound Georgia National Guard unit, the 48th Infantry Brigade, he was ready to join them. They ended up at this dustblown base in Iraq's far west, pulling escort duty for fuel convoys on the bomb-pocked desert highways from Jordan.

Why did he do it? The wiry lean Georgian, an easy-talking man with a boyish, sunburned face, tried to answer the question that won't go away.

"It's a lot of things combined," he said. "One, a sense of duty. I was pissed off at the terrorists for 9/11 and other atrocities. Second, I'd only trained. I wanted combat." And then, he said, "there's some revenge involved. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't."

But there was more on the mind of this man who has done Church of God missionary work as far afield as Peru and the Arctic.

"I don't really have love for Muslim people," Johnson said. "I'm sure there are good Muslims. I try not to be racist." Although he hasn't read the Quran, or spoken with Muslims, he has "heard" the Islamic holy book "teaches to kill Jews and infidels. And it's hard to love people who hate you."

He could love Iraqi children, though, and said he'd hoped "to see them grow up to know right and wrong."

Somewhere along the way, however, the righteous passion cooled, as the over-aged corporal, like tens of thousands of other American soldiers here, faced the reality of Iraq.

Was it last Christmas morning, when roadside bombs rocked his convoy one after another, and Johnson thought he was next? Or was it when speeding civilian cars passed the Americans' Humvees and Johnson failed to level his gun and open fire, which "I think anyone else," fearing car bombs, "would have done."

"I really don't want to kill innocent people," he now says. "I don't want to live with that the rest of my life."

Most of all, it might have been the telephone calls home to Jan, who was dealing not only with depression and other health problems, but also with the prospect that their elder soldier son, Josh, 26, might be sent to Iraq or Afghanistan.

"I don't like that Joe's there," Jan Johnson said when called by satellite telephone from al-Asad. "But it's something he felt he had to do. People heal in different ways. This is how he heals after Justin's death."

"She's ready for me to come home," Joe Johnson concludes.

He will. His battalion exits Iraq in early May, when Johnson's own enlistment term, coincidentally, expires. "That's it," he said, no re-enlistment for him.

But what about revenge?

"If I go home and didn't kill a terrorist, it's not going to ruin my life," he said. "Maybe I'd just as soon not. I don't know what it would do to my head."

Once back home among the northwest Georgia pines, he has one last ceremonial act in mind, removing the silver-toned bracelet he's worn on his right wrist throughout his deployment, bearing Justin's name and date of death. Joe Johnson's mission will have been accomplished.

Whatever it was, he said, "I got it out of my system."