Marine’s stolen car returned to him

Written by By Babette Herrmann Sun Editor
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Evan Staat of Xenia, Ill., recently and honorably discharged from the Marine Corps after five years of service, was anxious to get back home to civilian life so he could be near his beloved family, and begin his studies to become a lineman operator.

Stationed in California, Staat, 23, packed his belongings, some of which consisted of computers, cameras, his uniforms, and three marksmanship awards, and headed east with his father Dan Staat in his light metallic green 1968 Chevy Nova with its two large white stripes across the hood and trunk.

Tired from the long drive down Interstate 40, the father-son duo decided to retire for the evening in Gallup –Rand McNally’s “Most Patriotic Small Town in America,” unbeknownst to them. Staat parked his car in the back lot at the Hampton Inn & Suites north, and settled in for the night.

It was on the morning of June 3, when Dan and Evan Staat like other traveling folks, checked out of the room, and headed to the car. But Evan Staat’s prized car had vanished into thin air, causing his heart to sink and prompting him to call the Gallup Police Department to file a report, and start what seemed like a fruitless search for the car.

“You don’t think it’s going to happen to you until it does,” he said, during a phone interview.

Still stunned from the incident, the soft-spoken Staat was not only concerned about retrieving his classic car, but also getting back his uniforms and awards, plus a sentimental teddy bear that dangled from his rearview mirror that he fondly said, “a lady gave me.”

However, Staat and his family weren’t in this search alone.

His aunt Kim Staat Stoub sounded the social media alarms and dropped the *Gallup Sun* a Facebook message and photo of Evan Staat’s prized ride. From there, the message and photo was posted, and shared hundreds of times with comments pouring in to encourage Staat, and to slam the thief or thieves that made off with his car.

Many folks also offered to help him out, and others apologized that he had to experience a darker side of Gallup.

Staat reluctantly continued his trip to Illinois. He had to figure out a game plan to return to Gallup to search for his car.

But, those plans came to an abrupt end, thanks to some unexpected news from the McKinley County Sheriff’s Office about a vehicle SWAT officers found hiding under some brush, boards and blankets out past Mentmore on County Road 1, near the area known by locals as the climbing wall, June 4. It was his ’68 Chevy Nova.

SWAT was there to engage in some tactical practices when they discovered the car nearby.

"It was really pretty cool," Staat said, when he heard the news as he was traveling through Missouri. "I figured it would have taken longer to find it."

Instead of turning around with his dad, the father and son met up with mom, Angie Staat, and the two headed south to New Mexico.

Meanwhile, American Muffler & Towing was dispatch to tow the vehicle back to their yard on Ninth Street. Owner Pancho Hurtado took a photo of the Nova after it was placed on the flatbed tow truck, and posted it on his Facebook page, along with a note:

"Best stolen vehicle I have recovered to date! Apology from us good folks in Gallup … it's here for you to pick up free of charge anytime!"

Staat and his mom were back in Gallup shortly after noon on June 5 to pick up the car. Evan Staat looked anxious to get into the vehicle to see what was left of his belongings. His uniforms, award medals, teddy bear, and other items were found to his relief, but his Toshiba laptop and desktop computers, GoPro camera, and "a sentimental bottle of whisky" were missing.

So, Evan Staat's search continues as he has no backup files of the memories he snapped while in the Marine Corp.

After some visiting with media and Hurtado, mom and son finally hit the road in separate vehicles.

"We're so grateful to the people of Gallup. So many people sharing and caring. It really mushroomed," Angie Staat said, referring to all of the Facebook comments on the stolen car. "I am in awe of all the good people that jumped in and helped."

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