Taking life in

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As they said he was dying, Ethan wasn’t done living

Ethan Arbolo, 11, runs along the beach an hour after leaving the hospital after he vomited and had a nosebleed that would not coagulate on June 26, 2013, in Carlsbad, Calif. California was the halfway mark in a cross-country road trip, where Ethan and his mom had a checklist of stops that Ethan wanted to make.

Ethan says goodbye to his grandfather, Jake Moldados, after his mom, Maria Moldados, right, surprised him with a visit June 24, 2013, in Tucumcari, N.M.

Midway through his French toast in June 2013, Ethan Arbolo hurried to the bathroom and shut the door. Soon after, his mother heard him faintly calling for her. She got up from the table and went into the bathroom, where a spray of blood covered the toilet.

“Where’s the closest emergency room?” she shouted. Ethan, who had finished vomiting, held a tissue to his face to stop his nosebleed. They were in California, 2,600 miles from their home in Lehigh Acres.

A friend called 911 and minutes later, paramedics parked their engine outside and headed over to investigate.

“This is Ethan, he’s 11,” one of them said, briefing a colleague. “He’s got, uh, it’s basically brain cancer.”

“It’s called anaplastic astrocytoma,” Ethan said. The paramedics loaded mother and son into the ambulance and headed to the Tri-City Medical Center. In the emergency room, a nurse began to fill out paperwork.

“Where are you visiting from?” she asked.

“Florida,” said Maria, 41. “He’s on his bucket list.”

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Following the ‘order’

Ethan says goodbye to his grandfather, Jake Moldados, after his mom, Maria Moldados, right, surprised him with a visit June 24, 2013, in Tucumcari, N.M.
Ethan thought he might end up on the wall one day, too. “I want to be a Marine,” he said. “If I become a Marine, then instead of retiring I want to become a drill instructor, always yelling at people.” When Ethan was diagnosed, Maria assumed that role.

“She treats me like she’s my drill instructor and I’m her recruit,” he said. Marines weren’t allowed to die without permission, without “the Order.”

That fall, she finalized plans to make him an Honorary Marine, an honor bestowed on fewer than 100 people since it became a formal title in 1972. She called her plan Operation Devil Pop, a spin on the “devil dog” nickname for Marines.

ON HALLOWEEN MORNING, MARIA BROKE HER SON to the 4th Assault Amphibian Battalion Headquarters in Tampa, just outside the Marine Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base.

Ethan, at first a little confused, realized he was the guest of honor. “Making you an Honorary Marine,” said Lt. Gen. Robert B. Neller, the highest-ranking official on base, “is our way of recognizing that you’re resilient, you’re faithful, you never quit. You find a way to overcome.”

The ceremony was short. Someone asked Ethan if he wanted to shoot a grenade launcher, which seemed more fun anyway. He turned his attention to an amphibious assault vehicle. “Will I get to drive it?” Ethan asked. “I really want to drive it.” They slipped a helmet onto his head, helped him into the back of the vehicle and took him for a spin.

“Beautiful! Now you’re a real Marine. You’ve talked with ‘em,” his mom said.

The ceremony was for him and also for her. Maria remembered walking across the parade deck for her own graduation, and how everything she had been through – her entire rocky childhood, her years in high school – how that moment, everything was somehow finally worth it.

“When you walk across that parade deck and you do eyes right, and you see the person that means the most to you looking back and the pride in their face, you’re not just looking, yeah,” she said later. “And I wanted that for my children.”

“The only one that really had the balls enough to do it was Ethan. And I feel robbed. Even with him having Honorary Marine status, I feel robbed. ‘Cause I want to know what my dad felt. And I only got to feel a portion of that.”

THE NEXT MONTH, AT THE END OF NOVEMBER, Ethan was due for another MRI. Maria knew his tumors must be doing work because of the palsy, the way he couldn’t quite move his left hand as he wanted to.

It took only a few hours to get the news from Dr. Joseph Pothast, a pediatric radiologist. The tumors were growing, now taking over his spine.

After lunch, they met with Ethan’s oncologist. “What do think about doing chemo?” Dr. Stapleton asked. “I say let’s give it a try,” Ethan said.

“OK,” she said. “What if it makes you feel bad?” “Keep going,” he said. The doctor asked Maria if they could speak privately. “Only God Knows,” Dr. Stapleton said. “But I would say with that amount of progression ... you know, his poor little brain. It’s about the most tumor than brain, at this point.”

“How do you tell a Marine to stop fighting?” Maria asked.

“You have done everything,” Dr. Stapleton said. “You have done your homework, you have done your research, you have reached out across the country to me, you’ve brought me papers, you’ve emailed me ... you have done everything.

You couldn’t have possibly done any more as far as trying to find a way to cure him. The problem is – it’s we, as a medical community, don’t have the ability to cure this tumor. They talked for a while and decided it was time to approach Ethan.

The two walked into the room where Ethan sat, reading from a book of jokes called “Monkey Farts.”

“Dr. Stapleton said it’s time to issue the Order,” his mother said. “No. It’s not,” Ethan said. “She said the chemo won’t help ...” “It’s not time yet ... that it’s growing too fast.” “It’s not time.” “I am afraid,” she said, crying. “Don’t cry,” he said. “Dr. Stapleton isn’t my commanding officer. You are.” “She’s God’s messenger,” Maria said.

“God makes miracles,” he insisted.

Maria gives Ethan one last hug before he heads for his MRI on Nov. 12, 2013, at All Children’s Hospital in St. Petersburg. The MRI will show that a tumor has taken over Ethan’s brain and cancer has spread into his spine. Doctors will inform them there is not much more they can do to help.

Maria looks at Ethan’s dress blues, the uniform he received after becoming an Honorary Marine, on Nov. 27, 2013, at their home in Lehigh Acres. “This is what he will rest in eternity in,” Maria said.

COMING TUESDAY

Accepting the Order.
Maria Moldanado watches as Marite pallbearers carry Ethan’s casket during his funeral July 12 in Fort Myers. Ethan died with the rank of Sgt U.S. Marine E-5.

“Thank you all for loving my little man,” Marite said.

The Lost Riders arrived soon after to take her away. She tied a red scarf over her head to protect her hair.

“Don’t make me cry,” she said.

At the church, the funeral directors folded an American flag over Ethan’s casket, and Marite began straightening the pins on his dress blues. Inside one of his pockets was a Mickey Mouse pin, as a reminder that he was still a kid. In the background, a slideshow played, with the photos falling into two main categories: Ethan with Marite, and Ethan with pretty girls.

Two days after Ethan died, Maria receives a tattoo of a drawing Ethan made with their initials just before losing movement in his hands, at Ink Cafe in Cape Coral.

Wearing a black dress with red flowers in her hair, Maria hugged and kissed a long line of visitors. Like Ethan, she had a way of smiling even when she hurt.

In the program was a psalm about the Lord as a refuge and a fortress, but she wavered on God’s existence. Before the diagnosis, she’d been a believer, but now she wasn’t sure. It was annoying to hear people say they were sorry, because the cancer wasn’t their fault. It was painful to hear them say that Ethan was in a better place, because his place was in her arms.

She took the podium early in the service, one of the first speakers to address the 400-500 people in attendance.

“You all are loving my little man,” she said.

At the end of the ceremony, a Marine knelt down and handed Marite the folded flag, giving her the appearance of a war widow. The pallbearers carried Ethan outside and into the hearse.

At Diamond, Ethan’s friends and family ordered pitchers of beer and platters of wings and watched his pictures shuffle across a giant projection screen. Some played pool. Others chalked up women. Glasses clinked and waitresses moved around manically, as if not expecting such a large crowd.

Across the room was the table where Ethan had played pool, the bar stool where he’d sat to open his presents and the jukebox where he’d played the Charlie Daniels Band just 11 months earlier. This was the place they celebrated Ethan turning 12. Now, it was the place they felt the loss of 13, 14, 15 and all the years that would have followed.

Just before 6, a bagpipe player came to the bar and began to play “Amazing Grace.” Under the neon lights, Ethan’s friends lifted their drinks, and the bagpiper marched back and forth through the room, one foot in front of the other, the song filling the air. And it really was the sweetest sound.

As “Amazing Grace” is played by a bagpipe player, Maria lifts her glass in celebration of Ethan’s life with friends Chris Terranova, left, and Joanne Delono, right, on July 12 at Diamond Billiards in Cape Coral.