

FOREIGN DESK

THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: THE HOMETOWN; Cleveland Suburb Reels After Deaths of Marines

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BROOK PARK, Ohio, Aug. 3 - This blue-collar suburb of Cleveland has sent many of its young to war, and it is no stranger to death. But this week was harder than just about any in memory, people said Wednesday.

On Monday, five marines from a reserve battalion that has its headquarters here were killed in an ambush in western Iraq. By Wednesday morning, the names of the dead were still trickling out, leaving hundreds of residents in anguish about friends and loved ones. For in Brook Park, almost everyone knows someone in the war.

For nearly 36 hours, Mayor Mark J. Elliott wondered about one of his best friend's sons. Officer George Sakellakis of the Brook Park Police Department worried about a colleague. And Helen Keller's stomach tied itself into knots every time she thought about the reservists she had baked cookies for, sent care packages to and cuddled like a surrogate mother over the years.

Their worst fears did not come true. But others were not so lucky. The dead included marines like Cpl. Jeffrey A. Boskovitch, 25, the oldest of three children in a family who grew up in nearby Parma and was quarterback on the Normandy High School football team there. "We didn't have a chance to tell him to his face that he did a great job," said his uncle, Paul Boskovitch.

And then Wednesday brought more bad news: 14 marines from the same battalion, the Third of the 25th Marines, were killed when a bomb ripped apart their armored troop carrier in western Iraq. While those marines were attached to a company based in Columbus, military officials said, the fact that they were part of the same battalion hit Brook Park like a follow-up punch.

"It's all family," said Mrs. Keller, 64, the wife of a former marine. "Even if they don't know the person who has died, people here feel like it was their brother."

Though most of the marine reservists did not live in Brook Park, a city of 21,000 that lies in the shadow of Cleveland's airport, many were known in town, marching in Memorial Day parades, working out at the city recreation center, eating breakfast at the Place to Be Deli across Smith Road from the reserve headquarters.

More important, the unit itself had become a source of pride and honor for the town, which in addition to a sprawling Ford engine plant, is also home to an Army National Guard station and has many war veterans.

"There is something deeply American about that community," said Representative Dennis J. Kucinich, a Democrat who represents the town. "So when a blow of this enormity hits, it is absolutely staggering. Brook Park is a community whose heart is just broken right now."

Corporal Boskovitch joined the Marine Reserves in 2000 and he was not nervous about going to war for the first time when the battalion deployed to Iraq in January, his uncle said. Indeed, Corporal Boskovitch believed strongly he was helping the Iraqi people, and even learned a bit of Arabic while he was there.

But he also wrote e-mail messages home in recent weeks expressing concerns about an influx of foreign fighters into Iraq. "He said, 'Things are changing here. There are faces I have not seen and there's a different attitude,'" Mr. Boskovitch said.

Corporal Boskovitch was engaged to a longtime girlfriend and they were thinking about getting married after he returned from Iraq, in October they hoped.

The other marines who died in the town of Haditha on Monday included Sgt. David J. Coullard, 32, of Glastonbury, Conn.;

Lance Cpl. Daniel N. Deyarmin Jr., 22, of Tallmadge, Ohio; Lance Cpl. Brian P. Montgomery, 26, of Willoughby, Ohio, and Sgt. Nathaniel S. Rock, 26, of Toronto, Ohio. A sixth marine who died with the group, Lance Cpl. Roger D. Castleberry Jr., 26, of Austin, Tex., was attached to a different battalion, the Department of Defense said.

Although the Third Battalion has lost nearly 50 marines in the Iraq war, this week was by far the most bloody for the unit. The roadside bombing that killed 14 marines on Wednesday was also among the most deadly combat incidents for the Marine Corps since the war began.

Sergeant Rock's sister, Nicole Sneaghen, said that from the time he was a teenager he was fascinated by the marines, asking her husband, also a marine, to bring him camouflage pants, ready-to-eat meals and face paint so he could play war.

"He was born to be a marine," she said. "He loved everything about it."

Sergeant Rock planned to start a full-time job with the Police Department in Martins Ferry, Ohio, when he returned from Iraq this fall, she said. He wrote home frequently, assuring her that he would be safe. His calm tone made it all the more painful when she was notified of his death late Monday afternoon.

"We knew the consequences of him going, but it's still the worst thing that can happen to any family," Ms. Sneaghen said. "He was so young and talked about coming home and finding a girlfriend and getting married and having babies."

Sergeant Coullard joined the marines in 1994 after graduating from high school in Glastonbury, Conn., said his mother, Anita Dziedzic of East Hartford. As a reservist, he installed heating and air-conditioning systems. But he seemed to crave action, Ms. Dziedzic said, and he became a sniper who was shot twice before he was killed on Monday.

"He was a trouper," Ms. Dziedzic said, alternating between tears and smiles as she recalled her only son, later adding, "I was kind of in charge of his P.R., of getting him the recognition he deserved since he'd never seek it himself."

At the battalion headquarters, a reconfigured school building, residents had laid bouquets of roses, photographs of dead marines and six plastic foam crosses adorned with red, white and blue carnations.

Despite the pallor that seemed to hang over much of the town, Lt. Col. Kevin Rush, the senior officer at the headquarters, said marines in the battalion had set aside their shock and grief to do their jobs.

"Everyone who joined this battalion knew what they were getting into," Colonel Rush, 40, said. "Marines are the tip of the spear. The people we shoot at are going to shoot back."

Officer Sakellakis, 27, said that several friends had been sent to Iraq, including one with the Third Battalion, and that he believed they had been deeply shaken by the deaths this week. But Officer Sakellakis, a former Army reservist who served in Iraq, said he also believed it was easier to look beyond one's grief on the battlefield than it was for people back home.

"There, they have to go out and do their job the next day," he said. "Here, we have time to think about it, which I think makes it much worse."

Mayor Elliott, 47, said that for all Brook Park's experience with war, this week's death toll had shed a harsh new light on the war in Iraq, bringing home bloodshed that had seemed distant to some. For that reason, he said he thought some residents might begin to question the continuing American military presence in Iraq.

"When it hits home this much, I would expect people to say: 'How many more lives do we have to lose before we get our troops back home?'" he said.

Charles Keller, a former marine who is married to Helen Keller, said he also worried that people would turn against the war effort. But opposing the war now would dishonor the sacrifice of the marines from the Third Battalion, he said.

"We don't want our guys over there, either," Mr. Keller, 71, said. "But what are you going to do? We're either going to have to fight the terrorists over there, or fight them over here."

Photos: The marine reservists killed on Monday were, from left, Cpl. Jeffrey A. Boskovitch, Lance Cpl. Roger D.

Castleberry Jr., Sgt. David J. Coullard, Cpl. Daniel N. Deyarmin Jr., Lance Cpl. Brian P. Montgomery, and Sgt. Nathaniel S. Rock. All but Corporal Castleberry were in a battalion based in Brook Park, Ohio.; Lt. Col. Kevin Rush, senior officer at the Marine reserve headquarters in Brook Park, Ohio, said battalion members had set aside their grief to do their jobs. A former marine, Donald Morgan, his daughter Taylor and his niece Alicia Williams placing flags outside the headquarters yesterday. (Photographs by Michael Houghton for The New York Times)

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