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Visitors honor fallen soldiers one last time

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Visitors honor fallen soldiers one last time



Posted: Sunday, February 25, 2007 3:42 am

Art Martori

A day before the news from Iraq reached his family in Arizona, Myron Shondee knew his little brother had died. Shondee, a 31-year-old Ahwatukee Foothills resident and member of the Navajo Nation, said he sensed Harry Shondee's death the moment the 19-year-old Army medic was killed by a roadside explosion.

"I got a feeling, like somebody hit me on the shoulder: 'Your brother just died in an explosion, in his Humvee,' " Myron said. "I just blew that one off."

A day later, another of Myron's brothers took him aside to relay the more formal news of Harry's death. "My brother the next morning told me," Myron said. "But I already knew." Now, Harry is among hundreds of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq who are symbolized by pairs of empty combat boots bearing their names. The Eyes Wide Open exhibit includes more than 450 sets of boots and is traveling across the Valley.

On Monday and Tuesday, Eyes Wide Open will be on display at Arizona State University in Tempe. It will also include a special exhibit of

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90 pairs of boots, which symbolize all the soldiers killed so far who had ties to Arizona. Eyes Wide Open isn't a protest, said coordinator Cheri Lippmann. It's aimed to direct attention to the human cost of war.

"Sometimes, people don't see that peoples' lives ending is part of war," Lippmann said. "A lot of times, they don't see the flag-draped coffins."

Americans too often focus on politics and forget that families of the troops need support, she said.

"It's really playing a disastrous role with families," Lippmann said. "Now, they have a hole in their

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lives. We just need as a community to support them.”

When military officials came to deliver the news to Harry Shondee’s family in Ganado, Ariz., his mother Isabel Shondee said she thought it was just another prank by her youngest son, who was notorious for playing jokes on people.

“I was sort of expecting him, because he did tell me that was the day they were due back in the states,” she said. “He was really happy when he called. I thought maybe instead of coming back on the plane, he was surprising me.”

Gov. Janet Napolitano said in a statement she felt sympathy for Arizonans who have lost family members in the Iraq war.

“My heart goes out to every family that has suffered,” she said. “I have spoken to many of their families — mothers and fathers, husband and wives, and children.

“They all tell me how proud they are of the sacrifice their family members made for our country, and their hopes for a successful end to the conflict.”

East Valley residents who lost a family member in the Iraq war shared memories of their fallen soldiers: a trip to the movies with an older brother, or one mother’s source of constant strength and support.

Some family members offered a glimpse of their lives, in the absence of their loved ones.

Details about the soldiers’ deaths were obtained through reports released by the U.S. Department of Defense.

ARMY SPC. DOUGLAS C. DESJARDINS, 24, MESA

Desjardins died Nov. 5, 2006, in Ar Ramadi, Iraq, when an improvised explosive device detonated near his tank.

His sister, April Desjardins, 17, said it was still difficult to accept his death.

“You still think it didn’t happen,” April said. “I usually live my life day-by-day.”

Doug’s stepmother, Barbara Desjardins, said the hardest thing was “just knowing he’s not going to be there.”

“He’s not around anymore. You’re just not going to see him anymore,” she said.

April said she’ll miss going to see action-adventure films with her brother. Doug always liked the “X-Men” series, she said.

“When he came home, we’d always go to the movies,” April said. “He’d usually pick the movie.”

April said she grew worried when Doug went several days without logging onto his [MySpace.com](http://www.myspace.com) Web page, which had been their primary way of keeping in contact.

“He couldn’t really talk on the phone,” April said. “We kinda’ knew something was up because he usually was on (MySpace) every day.”

April added she wasn’t following the ongoing congressional debates on Iraq. But she said she never supported United States military involvement there.

“When I found out my brother was going, I was freaked out,” she said.

ARMY COMMAND SGT. MAJ. ERIC F. COOKE, 43, SCOTTSDALE

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Cooke died Dec. 24, 2003, in Baghdad, when an IED exploded near his vehicle.

His mother, Georgia Cooke, of Molall, Ore., said she'd lost a man who was her source of strength and support.

"As a single, older woman, I have lost the man in my life, the son that every mother dreams of having," she wrote in an e-mail. "There is a hole in my world that cannot be filled."

Georgia said she was comforted by the fact her son had been able to reach his 40s while many other soldiers die at a younger age.

"Eric was a man nearing middle age," Georgia said. "My son lived long enough for me to know what sort of a man he would grow to be."

Georgia didn't take sides in the current debate over U.S. policy in Iraq.

"What I do is pray for guidance, for myself and our national leaders, and, certainly, for the safe return of each and every one of our troopers," she said. She added that she felt obligated to honor her son by moving ahead with her own life. "Learning to live with that piece of me missing is a challenge," Georgia said. "I grieve Eric's passing daily, yet I do what he would demand of me. "I move on."

NAVY HOSPITALMAN ROBERT NATHAN MARTENS, 20, QUEEN CREEK

Martens was killed Sept. 6, 2005, in Al Qaim, Iraq, after his Humvee rolled over. His wife, Erin Martens, said the morning she found out about her husband's death seemed eerily familiar.

"It's straight-up out of the movies, when they come to your house in their military uniforms," she said. "It was like 5 or 6:30 in the morning.

"I knew it when those people came, it was over," Erin said. "They say they have two people — in case the person freaks out."

Erin said she slept at her mother's house, rather than her own empty home, for six months following Nathan's death.

Erin said she's making progress dealing with her husband's death, even though at times it might not seem that way to her.

"When you think you haven't come a long way, you just look back at that first minute," she said.

The Eyes Wide Open exhibit is a fitting memorial, Erin said. Often, people don't realize that statistics reported by the media represent human beings, she said.

Nathan died in Iraq alongside several other soldiers. At their funeral, an empty helmet and pair of combat boots stood by the graves, Erin said.

The empty gear was a stark reminder of war's human cost, Erin said.

"You see those numbers," she said. "And those numbers don't mean as much as when you put your hand on it."

The 26-year-old Mesa resident said she's looked for support at meeting groups for widows. But it's difficult to find people who understand her situation.

"I've been to some widows clubs and they're all in their 70s and 80s," she said.

"There's not a lot of young widows."

Erin's father, Buckeye police Chief Dan Saban, said it would've been impossible for family

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members to brace themselves for the trauma that followed Nathan's death.

"You're not prepared for it," Saban said. "And when it happens, there's not really a manual.

"You don't just turn to page seven, and then here's what you do."

ARMY PFC. HARRY N. SHONDEE, JR., 19, GANADO, ARIZ.

Shondee died Aug. 2, 2004, in Baghdad, Iraq, when an IED exploded near his Humvee. Isabel said she went into a state of shock the day she was told she'd never again see her youngest son.

"Everything just went blank," she said. "It's still kind of tough on me."

She started to cry.

Harry was an honors student who graduated early from high school and planned to go to college, Isabel said. But he joined the military when he realized how much his education would cost.

He had hoped to receive medical training that he could bring back to the Navajo reservation, Isabel said. Harry was killed just a few days before he was scheduled to return from Iraq. "He said he was going to be coming home," Isabel said. "But not like that. Not like that."

ARMY SPC. JUSTIN B. ONWORDI, 28, CHANDLER

Onwordi died alongside Pfc. Shondee when an IED exploded near their Humvee. Onwordi was killed two years after he emigrated to the United States from Nigeria, and two weeks after the birth of his son, Jonathan Charles.

His older brother, Uzor Onwordi, 38, said he's learned a lot about himself since his brother died.

"I didn't know I could be so weak," said the Tempe gym owner. "But I didn't know I could be so strong."

Sometimes Uzor can't help but think how things would've been different if his brother hadn't moved to the East Valley.

"That was most painful, because he could have stayed where he was," he said.

He said he was worried that his brother's decision to join the military came under a particularly war-minded president.

"I never liked the idea of him even joining," Uzor said. "I thought timing wasn't right. But it wasn't my place to determine that."

Now, he tries not to dwell on the circumstances which led to his brother's untimely death, he said.

"It's not easy, man. The kid was young," he said. "In many situations, there's no justice to war."

By the numbers

The cost of Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003 to present. U.S. soldiers killed: 3,142 Arizona soldiers killed: 76

East Valley soldiers killed: 16

Iraqi civilian deaths: Estimates range from 56,367 to 62,085

U.S. spending: \$316 billion

Source: U.S. Department of Defense, National Priorities Project, iraqbodycount.org

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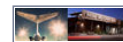
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TO OUR READERS:

Casualty information came from the Department of Defense, which lists each soldier's city of residence. The Tribune acknowledges some troops who had ties to the East Valley weren't listed in this report. We offer sincere condolences to every family touched by the conflicts overseas.

East Valley death toll

So far, 16 soldiers who indicated to the Department of Defense they were from the East Valley have been killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan. Others who had ties to the East Valley were not included.

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM:

- Army National Guard Sgt. Howard Paul Allen, 31, of Mesa, died Sept. 26, 2005, in Baghdad.
- Army Command Sgt. Maj. Eric Francis Cooke, 43, of Scottsdale, died Dec. 24, 2003, in Baghdad.
- Army Spc. Douglas Christopher Desjardins, 24, of Mesa, died Nov. 11, 2006, in Ar Ramadi, Iraq.
- Army Pfc. Joseph Jonathan Duenas, 23, of Mesa, died Mar. 30, 2006, in Tikrit, Iraq.
- Army Spc. Andrew Christopher Erlich, 21, of Mesa, died Oct. 18, 2004, at Forward Operating Base Normandy, Iraq.
- Navy Hospitalman Robert Nathan Martens, 20, of Queen Creek, died Sept. 6, 2005, in Al Qaim, Iraq.
- Army Sgt. Jason Lynn Merrill, 22, of Mesa, died Sept. 3, 2006, in Baghdad.
- Marine Cpl. Dominique Jean Nicolas, 30, of Scottsdale, died May 26, 2004, in Al Anbar province, Iraq.
- Army Sgt. Justin Bialiolisa Onwordi, 28, of Chandler, died Aug. 2, 2004, in Baghdad.
- Army National Guard Cpl. Jeremiah Wayne Robinson, 20, of Mesa, died Oct. 6, 2005, in Baghdad.
- Army Sgt. Nicholas Ryan Sowinski, 25, of Tempe, died Oct. 11, 2006, in Baghdad.
- Navy Lt. Nathan Dennis White, 30, of Mesa, died April 2, 2003, in Baghdad.
- Army National Guard Sgt. Elijah Tai Wah Wong, 42, of Mesa, died Feb. 9, 2004 in Sinjar, Iraq.
- Army Pvt. Kelly David Youngblood, 19, of Mesa, died Feb. 18, 2007, in Ramadi, Iraq.

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM:

- Army Staff Sgt. Brian Scott Hobbs, 31, of Mesa, died Oct. 14, 2004, in Miam Do, Afghanistan.
 - Army Cpl. Patrick Daniel Tillman, 27, of Chandler, died April 22, 2004, in Salerno, Afghanistan.
- Source: U.S. Department of Defense

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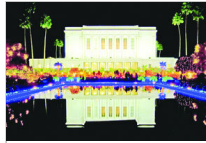
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