

Black Hawk Down: The True Cost Of Iraq War

For American soldiers stationed in Iraq, one of the few comforts of this war is how easily they can keep in touch with family back home.

Many service members call their spouses and kids several times a week and e-mail daily, reassuring them that they are all right. Sgt. 1/c John Gary Brown knew his wife, Donna, worried every time he went up in the air. A Black Hawk helicopter crew chief and gunner with an Arkansas Army National Guard unit, Brown had experience calming the anxieties of his wife of 18 years. War had separated them before: Brown had flown missions over a similarly bleak landscape a decade and a half ago when he served in the Gulf War. That didn't make it any easier for Donna, so Brown called and wrote her almost every day. The only phone available to him was two miles from his barracks. At first he made the trek on foot, then bought a bicycle from a soldier who was rotating out. In their conversations, he reassured his wife that most of the time he was making routine flights over relatively safe territory. He even asked her to send "care" packages filled with sweets so that he could drop "candy bombs" to Iraqi children as the chopper whirled by. But there was no hiding the hazards of his duty. Large and often low to the ground, helicopters are a favorite target of insurgents, who fire at them with machine guns and rockets. They are also prone to mechanical problems, especially in the unforgiving Iraqi climate. About 90 helicopters have been lost since the war began. Soldiers are not permitted to give their families details about combat operations. So Brown used a simple code when he spoke to Donna. If he mentioned he was going on a "training" flight, she knew not to worry. But if he told her he was going on a "mission," that meant he was heading into dangerous territory and he promised to contact her as soon as he landed. At 5:14 in the evening on Friday, Jan. 19, Donna was at home in Little Rock when Gary called and said the word she dreaded. He was at the airfield and ready to take off—this time on a "mission." Brown had just returned to Iraq after a 15-day home leave. On the phone, he told his wife how much he'd enjoyed being back with her and their two children and pair of grandchildren. Then he cut the conversation short. "I really have to go," he said. In the background, she could hear the thumping of the chopper's rotors. She began to worry when he didn't call or e-mail on Saturday, but told herself he was probably still on duty and couldn't get to a phone or computer. She spent the day willing the phone to ring. When he still hadn't called by Sunday, she says, she suspected the worst. Still, the solemn visit from the Army's Casualty Assistance Officers came as a surprise. On Monday afternoon, there was a knock on the door. Christian, her 10-year-old grandson, answered and called to her that there were two men outside. She told the boy to ask them what they were selling. He said, "No, you don't understand. They're Army men." Including Brown, 12 soldiers died around 3 p.m. Iraq time on Saturday when his Black Hawk crashed in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad. The flight was a seemingly routine haul from the massive Camp Anaconda near Balad to the Iraqi capital, carrying four crew and eight passengers. Not far from the town of Baqubah, Brown's chopper—Easy 4-0—broadcast a mayday signal and went down; an accompanying Black Hawk landed nearby and its soldiers reportedly took fire from insurgents. The Army has been unusually tight-lipped about the details of the crash. It has not said exactly what went wrong. At first it reported 13 people had died, then 12. Officials tentatively blamed an equipment malfunction, then enemy fire. Now they say the crash is under investigation. The families of the soldiers say the Army did warn them not to expect much in the way of remains. Those looking to put the crash into some larger perspective might point out that 10 of those who died were members of the National Guard—the greatest number of guard members killed in a combat mission since the Korean War. Or that the number of U.S. soldiers killed across Iraq that day (25 in all) made it one of the deadliest since the war began. But the most remarkable thing about the crash might be how quickly the deaths of a dozen soldiers can pass into and out of the public's consciousness these days, if they ever register at all. More than 3,000 U.S. service members have now died in the Iraq war. At first it was difficult not to feel overwhelmed by the number of deaths. After four years, it is now difficult not to feel numb. In a nation without a draft, the emotional connection between the front and the home front is the weakest it has been in a major conflict in recent memory. There are so many news accounts of troops killed in combat that the details blur. The death of one soldier, or 20, loses its power to shock, except to the families of the fallen. At some point, the way we talk

about the war itself changes. We speak less and less about husbandless wives and parentless children, and instead obscure the suffering in vaguer, more distant and—guiltily—easier terms. We shake our heads and talk about the "losses."

In Washington, the talk is now all about Iraq. Democrats, emboldened by their control of Congress and the president's sinking poll numbers, no longer fear being labeled "Defeatocrats" if they take a stand against George Bush on the war. And some Republicans, including Sens. Chuck Hagel and John Warner, are speaking out against the handling of the war and about the cost in human life. Nonetheless, the president, trying to appear conciliatory and resolute at the same time, is determined to send an additional 21,000 troops to Iraq, no matter what anyone else thinks. If Congress rejects the idea, Dick Cheney told CNN last week, "it won't stop us." The president did not learn about the crash until late in the day on Saturday. Each morning he is handed what aides call "the blue sheets"—the overnight Iraq reports from the Situation Room that are printed on blue paper. The first line of each sheet lists the most recent casualties. But reports of the downed helicopter had not yet reached Washington. Bush spent part of the morning talking about the troop increase with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Both had recently returned from a tour of Europe and the Middle East to promote the new Iraq strategy. The news wasn't all good. Not surprisingly, some of the allies weren't in favor of a troop escalation. Is the president right that the additional troops can turn things around? Or is Iraq lost? These questions are the makings of a serious and long-overdue debate over the war. And yet so much of the chatter turns on the politics of the war. Who is up and who is down for 2008? Is the Bush presidency effectively "over" and will Americans trust a Democrat—and possibly a woman—to be commander in chief? Democrats (and rebelling Republicans) invest their passions in clinical debates over "exit strategies" and "withdrawal timetables," and congratulate themselves for "nonbinding" resolutions that condemn an increase in troops while still allowing them to go into the field. But few seem to be grappling with the fate of those soldiers. There are, as always, more questions than answers about what to do in Iraq. Honest people can disagree about whether it is more dangerous to stay or to leave. But the 12 Americans who died in the Black Hawk crash offer us a vivid reminder of what is happening on the battlefield, and of the cost so many families are paying when loved ones die in combat. Guard members have taken on much of the burden of this war, and those who died aboard that helicopter were like many others who have lost their lives in the fighting: ordinary people asked to do the extraordinary. They were husbands and wives, parents and even grandparents. Some relied on their faith in God, others, their faith in the commander in chief. At least one no longer believed the war was worth fighting, but carried out his duties. Together, they left behind 34 children and at least a dozen grandchildren. As we contemplate sending more men and women like them into harm's way, their demise leaves behind perhaps the only question that truly matters in wartime: is it worth it? Army Capt. Sean Lyerly believed it was. At 31, Lyerly was among the younger soldiers onboard the helicopter. A proud Texan from a family with a history of military service, he went to Texas A&M and joined up with the Texas Army National Guard. "It's in the genes," says his father, George Lyerly, who himself served in the Army. "His granddaddy and uncle fought in World War II." Lyerly was determined to become a pilot. He flew relief missions in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina and told his family about the satisfaction he got from plucking stranded people from rooftops. Up to that point his wife, 24-year-old Csilla, had convinced herself that she had no reason to fear his dedication to the guard. She worried about his flying, but she didn't give a second thought to the possibility of his being called up to serve in combat. Most of the time Lyerly wasn't anywhere near an Army helicopter. In college he majored in horticulture and later worked as a manager in the garden department at a Home Depot. "The military was one weekend a month, two weeks a year. I never knew they could get deployed," Csilla says. "He mentioned something about maybe going to Bosnia, and I said, 'What do you mean, Bosnia? You're in the guard!'" But last February, he got the call, and it wasn't Bosnia. He was nervous about going to Iraq, but he was also proud to become the next in his family to serve overseas. Like so many other soldiers, he said he "felt like he was making a difference." His wife tried to mirror his enthusiasm, but her fears sometimes got the better of her. "I was anxious. I had a bad gut feeling. There was just something ... " she recalls. A combat captain, Lyerly was based at the sprawling Camp Anaconda, a major way station for

the helicopter flights that crisscross Iraq now that the roads are so unsafe. Soldiers had nicknamed the place Mortaritaville because of frequent enemy attacks. Lyerly kept that kind of detail to himself when he called home to Pflugerville, a quiet suburb of Austin, each night at around 9 o'clock. Instead, he tried to re-create some semblance of home life by reading his toddler son, Zack, a favorite bedtime story—usually "Thomas the Tank Engine"—over a Webcam. A couple of days after Csilla was told that her husband had died, she tried to explain to her son what had happened. She told him about heaven, and described how beautiful it was. "Daddy went to heaven to meet God," she said gently. "We can talk to him, but we're not going to be able to see him anymore. He's always going to be able to hear us, but he's not going to come home." Zack looked back at her blankly. "Yes, he is," he said with all the worldly confidence of a 3-year-old. "He's in Iraq. When he's finished, he's going to come home." Cpl. Victor Langarica did not share Sean Lyerly's optimism about the mission in Iraq. From the moment he received his deployment orders last April, he seemed convinced that he would not leave the war zone alive. Worse, he believed that he was going to die for no good reason. A twice-divorced single father of a young son and daughter, he had joined the Army hoping to gain the skills that would lead to higher pay than he made at Home Depot. His mother and ex-wives looked after the kids while he was overseas. He was proud of the nine months he served in combat in Afghanistan after 9/11, but the experience left the lighthearted 29-year-old sullen and fearful. Once he was surprised by an Afghan soldier who put a gun to his head. Just as the soldier was about to fire, a fellow American shot the Afghan dead. He never found out who had saved his life, but thought of him as an angel.

Unlike most of the others who died in the crash, Langarica was regular Army. But when he got his deployment papers to Iraq, he didn't want to go. The invasion made no sense to him. " 'I don't understand why Bush is doing this to us'," his mother, Pearl Lucas, recalled his saying. " 'If I die, I won't know why I died, if it was for oil or for revenge.'" Langarica arrived in Iraq last September. His fears about the dangers were justified. Stationed in southern Baghdad, he worked as a heavy-equipment mechanic and shouldn't have been in the thick of combat. But his job required him to repair Humvees and other vehicles that had broken down in the streets, amid gunfire and missile attacks. One day, as he lay under a vehicle performing a repair, a bullet grazed the top of his scalp.

In November, Langarica was granted a two-week leave. He returned to the United States to visit his mother and daughter in Decatur, Ga., and his son in Brunswick, Md. He told relatives that he dreaded returning. His aunt urged him to desert the Army and seek refuge in Nicaragua, where she and his mother were born. But Langarica was determined to finish out his tour, and returned to Iraq. Before he left, he told friends he didn't think he was going to see them again. He had already convinced himself he was "an angel of God—no matter what happens I will always be around." In a letter to his mother in 2003, he had confided, "I know it sounds crazy, but I really believe I am [an angel]." The night before the helicopter flight, he called home for the last time, certain that he would die the next day. "You better make it," his mother told him. "Your kids are waiting here for you." She put his 6-year-old daughter, Devina, on the phone to talk with him. When he got back on the line with his mother, he was crying. "I will remember you every second," he said. Some of the time Jane Allgood was perfectly content not to know what her husband, Col. Brian Allgood, was doing over in Iraq. A West Point grad and orthopedic surgeon, Brian Allgood was the top medical officer for all Coalition forces in Iraq. He also used his position to help train Iraqi doctors. At 46, he was considered to be on the fast track to earning his first general's star. He routinely made hazardous trips around the country; his wife, Jane, a retired colonel who had served in the Army's Medical Service Corps, knew that his life was in danger. "I understood that it was an occupational hazard," she says. "I did not want to know when he was traveling in Iraq." The two had an arrangement. He would call home once a week, and e-mail as often as possible. Allgood never doubted his path in life. He met his future wife at 17, and had already planned to earn a medical degree and launch a military career. Expert in flight and combat surgery, he also trained as an Army Ranger so that he could better treat jumpers' injuries. He rose quickly, served as the top U.S. military doctor in South Korea and was next scheduled to command a medical brigade in Germany, where his wife and 11-year-old son, Wyatt, live. Allgood

considered himself a doctor first, and stuck his neck out to get troops the equipment he thought they needed. This fall, an infantry unit requested fire-retardant uniforms, which were typically worn only by flight crews. Allgood believed all the men should have them. Within days, he authorized \$20 million for the new uniforms. Officers with their eyes on promotion don't often make high-dollar demands of their superiors. "It would have been very easy to say no, or just give them to one unit," says Col. Donald Jenkins, who worked with Allgood in Baghdad. "There was a lot of questioning about the money. He didn't flinch." The mission that took his life was important to him. Allgood had spent hundreds of hours working to improve care for Iraqi civilians injured by insurgent attacks. He was returning to Baghdad that Saturday from Taji, where he had presented the Iraqi people with a new, American-built hospital. Stories about soldiers fighting in Iraq do not immediately evoke images of grandparents in uniform. But many guard troops, plucked from their everyday civilian lives, are well into their 40s or even 50s. Lt. Col. David C. Canegata III of the Virgin Islands National Guard was the father of four and left behind a 15-month-old grandson. Command Sgt. Maj. Marilyn Gabbard of the Iowa Army National Guard and her husband, Ed, had seven children and 11 grandchildren between them. She was the only woman aboard. At 46, she had been in the military 28 years and was the first woman in the Iowa Guard to reach her rank. Like Langarica, who eased his fears by believing himself an angel, many of the fallen took great comfort in faith. Canegata played keyboard and sang gospel in church with his wife, Shenneth. Thirty-seven-year-old Staff Sgt. Darryl Booker of the Virginia Army National Guard believed it was more than luck that saved him the day a rocket missed him by inches. "He would always tell me, 'I'm covered, Dad'," his father, Earnest Hardy, recalls. "Let me tell you, when he said he was covered, he meant Jesus was looking out for him. He was not talking about the U.S. government." Others relied on their devotion to the cause itself. Roger Haller, a 49-year-old command sergeant major with the Maryland Army National Guard, was the top-ranking enlisted man in the guard's HQ 70th Regiment. Inspired by 9/11, Haller went to Afghanistan, and later to Iraq, for what would be his final mission. His son, Sgt. Daniel Haller, also served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Daniel is back home, and his father's tour was coming to a close soon. He had hoped to make it in time for his daughter Kathryn's high-school graduation. Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Kathleen Hurley, Haller's longtime friend, reminisced about his optimism under fire and his unshakable belief that he was doing the right thing by serving. She echoed the sentiments of many friends and family members when she said she did not want his service to be forgotten. "I don't want him to be just another casualty statistic. He was so much more." Last Wednesday, about 1,200 soldiers gathered for a memorial service at Camp Anaconda. The base is home to the 36th Combat Aviation Brigade, the Army National Guard's first helicopter brigade. Four of the men who died in the crash had been assigned to the 36th CAB, whose service of moving men and material around Iraq is known as Catfish Air. The troops stationed there took the crash hard. On that Saturday afternoon the men knew something serious had happened. Internet and phone service were shut down across the base, a tactic the military uses to prevent information leaks when soldiers are killed. When the lead helicopter on the fateful flight returned, its crew was led off to be debriefed immediately, before they'd even finished shutting down their bird completely. Another 24 hours passed before soldiers on the base were even told that a Black Hawk had gone down. At the service, helmets and rifles were set up in honor of the dead. The brigade commander and chaplain rose to speak, then close friends of the fallen made short speeches. Together, the assembled soldiers had seen plenty of bloodshed, and many could not hold back their tears. "It was a pretty emotional scene," says Master Sgt. Charles Wheeler, a public-affairs officer. "People were not just trying to stand back and be stoic."

With reporting by Arian Campo-Flores in Decatur, Gretel C. Kovach in Pflugerville, Babak Dehghanpisheh in Baghdad, Stefan Theil in Heidelberg, Dan Ephron, Eve Conant, Richard Wolffe, Daren Briscoe, Jonathan Mummolo and Steve Tuttle in Washington and Andrew Murr, Sarah Childress and Karen Breslau. (Relayed by GuardWatch - Jan. 29, 2007)