

A Family Remembers Its Fallen Soldier

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Salem — Capt. Jason Hamill e-mailed his mother from Iraq on Jan. 17.

The Army officer had been in the country nearly two months and told his mother, Sharon, that he couldn't provide specifics about his job. But his mission involved clearing routes and trying to catch the AIF members, or Anti-Iraqi Force members, who planted explosives.

"The hard part," he wrote, "is finding the bombs."

Sharon Hamill paused while reading the e-mail aloud from a laptop computer at her kitchen table Tuesday afternoon.

"Well, he didn't find one," she said, then continued to read.

Hamill, 31, was killed Sunday when a roadside bomb detonated near the vehicle in which he was riding. The explosion, which happened about 9 a.m. Baghdad time, also killed two other soldiers.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell on Tuesday ordered all U.S. and state flags in Connecticut to be lowered to half staff to honor Hamill. Flags will remain at half staff until Hamill is interred.

Hamill was a 1993 graduate of East Lyme High School and grew up in Salem, where his parents, Richard and Sharon, still live. He was one in a set of triplets including a brother, Jeffrey, and a sister, Stephanie. Tonya is an older sister.

A captain in the 4th Infantry Division, based at Fort Hood, Texas, Hamill was a company commander in charge of about 70 soldiers.

The unit was deployed to Iraq in early December 2005 and was scheduled to return home any day when Hamill and the others were killed. A spokesman at Fort Hood said Tuesday that members of the 4th Brigade have been arriving home daily, and that about 60 percent of the division has returned. He said the entire division will be home by Christmas.

Hamill's body arrived on Tuesday at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where it will remain until funeral arrangements are complete. Richard Hamill said his son once said that, if killed in battle, he wanted to be buried with full military honors.

"That's the kind of path we're talking (about)," he said.

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Jason Hamill's enthusiasm for his new house in Texas was irrepressible. He built a stone patio and showed a flair for landscaping.

"He put in a palm tree," said his sister, Stephanie. She laughed and shrugged. "In Texas."

"He used to call me all the time and rave. 'My flowers are doing great, my roses are doing great,'" Sharon Hamill, said.

"He was concerned, going to Iraq, who was going to take care of it," Richard Hamill said.

A life of active duty meant Jason had lived in Europe and Kosovo before landing in Texas, where he met his wife, Karen, who was introduced to him by Jason's aunt, Beth Lynn, and where he bought the house.

"Texas was his first home," brother Jeffrey Hamill said by phone Tuesday.

In January 2005, the Hamill family traveled to Texas for the triplets' 30th birthday. The pack included Richard and Sharon, spouses and kids, Aunt Beth in Texas and Aunt Mary from Chicago, plus two high school friends who went along to surprise Jason.

"People slept on floors, on top of each other," Sharon Hamill said. "We were smart and got a hotel room."

The family had planned a similar party for this January. Jason and Karen already had their plane tickets to fly to Connecticut, Richard Hamill said Tuesday.

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Jason Hamill's military career began, in part, when he joined the ROTC program while attending the University of Connecticut. He started out studying engineering but ultimately graduated with a degree in economics, his family said.

He accepted his commission upon college graduation in January 1998. That same day, he gave his father a silver dollar, part of an Army tradition of which Richard Hamill, a retired Navy man, was unaware.

"I was enlisted, and officers used to pay enlisted men to shine their shoes," Richard Hamill said, joking. "... So maybe he wanted me to shine his shoes."

In reality, said Lt. Col. John Whitford, a spokesman for the Connecticut National Guard, tradition calls for the first person to salute the newly commissioned officer to be "coined."

Jeffrey Hamill said his brother became more outgoing after joining the Army and that he tried to take advantage of the travel that came with active duty. Jeffrey said he spent a week in Germany when Jason was stationed there.

"That was fun," he said. "I mean, the two of us just went around doing stupid things. We didn't even know what we were going to do, so we'd be like, 'Let's drive to Heidelberg and see what's up there.' ... We ended up touring the castle and just finding stupid things to do and meeting people."

Jason Hamill was the same way in high school, said a good friend, Jon Stadler.

"We both liked to be adventurous, have a little fun, cause a little trouble," said Stadler, of East Lyme, who met Hamill at East Lyme High School when he was a sophomore and Hamill was a freshman.

Stadler, one of the first friends the Hamill family mentions, said he wasn't sure whether he could be considered Hamill's best friend.

"I think Jason had a lot of close friends," he said. "He was a special person in that way. He would always make everyone feel they were very important to him.

"If you ever needed him, he was the first guy there, without question. I shared that relationship with him as well as a couple of other buddies. I don't know if he had one best friend in particular."

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Richard Hamill said he doesn't want to make political statements about the war.

"(Jason) believed very strongly that what he was doing made a difference," he said, adding that his son reported to

his family that what he saw on the news and what he saw in person were often two different things. "So he saw a disconnect between the media and what was actually occurring."

Jeffrey Hamill said Tuesday that he and his brother disagreed about the war, which Jeffrey said he had roundly opposed from the start.

"That's another hard part for me," Jeffrey said. "I feel like I lost my brother to a lost cause."

Sharon Hamill wears a green camouflage wristband bearing the unit's nickname: "Armor Hounds of Hell." She's worn it since about May, when Jason's wife sent batches of them to friends and family, part of a fund-raising effort for the unit.

It dangled around Sharon Hamill's wrist on Tuesday, and she would snap it from time to time. She trolled through photos, on the computer, of Jason at his wedding, of familiar Web sites, of old e-mails.

The Hamill family wanted to talk about Jason, they said Tuesday, to honor his memory.

"I think it would be important (to him)," Stephanie Hamill said, "(to let people know) that he believed in what he was doing."

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