

New York Times March 31, 2008

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/us/31war.html?_r=1&th&emc=th&oref=slogin Page 1

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/us/31war.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&th&emc=th Page 2

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/us/31war.html?pagewanted=3&_r=1&th&emc=th Page 3

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/us/31war.html?pagewanted=4&_r=1&th&emc=th Page 4

Five Years In

Tracking a Marine Lost at Home



Chip Litherland for The New York Times

Eric Hall, an Iraq war veteran, disappeared last month after having a flashback.

- [comments \(39\)](#)
- [Sign In to E-Mail or Save This](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Single Page](#)
- [Reprints](#)
- [Share](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY

IN SELECT
THEATRES 3/19

By [DAMIEN CAVE](#)
Published: March 31, 2008

PORT CHARLOTTE, Fla. — A week after Eric W. Hall disappeared into the woods of Southwest [Florida](#), his mother stood in a parking lot overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. She had asked for volunteers. Would they come?

Five Years In

Home Front

Articles in this series are examining crucial facets of the Iraq war.

Previous Articles

[In Mosul, New Test of Iraqi Army \(March 20, 2008\)](#)

[Fateful Choice on Iraq Army Bypassed Debate \(March 17, 2008\)](#)

[Iraq's Insurgency Runs on Stolen Oil Profits \(March 16, 2008\)](#)

Reach of War

[Go](#) [to](#) [Complete](#) [Coverage](#) [»](#)

Baghdad Bureau

A [blog](#) looking at daily life inside Iraq, produced by The Times's Baghdad bureau.

[Go to the Blog](#) [»](#)

Multimedia



[Audio Slide Show](#)

Reverberations of War

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Chip Litherland for The New York Times

Kevin and Becky Hall.

Readers' Comments

Share your thoughts on this article.

- [Post a Comment »](#)
- [Read All Comments \(39\) »](#)

Becky Hall's son had experienced a flashback, fleeing a relative's home after sensing that Iraqi insurgents had surrounded him. He was 24, a former Marine corporal from [Indiana](#) who had been medically discharged after a bomb ripped through his leg. Here, among the retirees and strip malls, he was a stranger.

And yet his absence spurred a community to action. More than 50 people stepped forward that first day in February. Others came later, young and old, contributing four-wheelers, pickup trucks, boats, horses, search-and-rescue dogs, and even a small plane.

They searched day in, day out for weeks because Mr. Hall's story broke their hearts and, many said, because his case inspired them to look past arguments over whether the war was right or wrong. It was a mission, not a debate: A marine was missing and had to be found.

"He has these issues as a result of what we asked him to do," said Kathryn Preston, 52, a botanist who spent time in the Army as a young woman and used her pontoon boat for the search. "It felt like we were responsible for him. People in the United States. All of us."

Here in Southwest Florida, the [Iraq](#) war is no stranger. Tampa has both the headquarters for Central Command, responsible for Iraq and Afghanistan, and one of four hospitals that care for the nation's most

severely wounded soldiers. Since 2003, at least 34 families from Clearwater to Fort Myers have endured the chest-crushing pain of a knock on the door that leads to a funeral.

Mr. Hall's story, to many, sounded familiar. And in the end, it connected military families from coast to coast. He was among the thousands who had been deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq more than once. When he came home in 2005 after being wounded by a bomb that killed his close friend, he was forced to endure repeated surgery, post-traumatic stress and the loss of his career in the Marine Corps.

At his parents' home in Indiana one day, he told his mother that he no longer fit in.

"Everyone is moving on," he said. "Look at me. I'm not."

Among marines and soldiers recently returned from Iraq — including men like Billy Huether who helped search for him — Mr. Hall's combat horrors rang true. His failure to readjust, in a society that often seems more concerned with Britney than bombs, also made him a brother to Vietnam veterans here, like Charlie Shaughnessy, who camped out for several nights looking for Mr. Hall.

And in the struggle of Mr. Hall's loving Midwestern family, many here and outside of Florida came to recognize a sad and unavoidable truth: that wars do not always end when the warriors come home. On the home front, they last a lifetime.

An Iraq Veteran

Mr. Huether, an outgoing father of two, worked as an Army recruiter from 1998 to 2003 in and around the town where Mr. Hall disappeared. He had served for more than a decade when he received the assignment, and the task became easier after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when scores of Americans signed up to serve their country in the fight against terrorism.

Even then, he said, the war in Iraq seemed inevitable and area residents seemed ready for its consequences.

"The American flags went up, the yellow ribbons came out," he said. "Instead of Tampa Bay Buccaneers' flags outside their windows, they were flying the American flags."

One in five of Port Charlotte's 46,000 mostly middle-class residents is a veteran, above the national average of 12.7 percent, according to the 2000 Census. In neighboring Punta Gorda, a smaller community, the share of veterans is even higher, 29 percent.

But it didn't take long for support of the Iraq war to fade. When Mr. Huether, 40, came home from a yearlong deployment to South Korea in the spring of 2004, he noticed that the community had become more skeptical, describing Iraqis as squanderers of freedom or outright killers. Even members of his family began to question whether the war could be won.

The change could be seen in the neighborhoods, where tracts of one-story homes opened onto screened-in patios. Some of the American flags had come down. A few weeks after he returned, he noticed signs on light poles and on plywood at construction sites, which appeared to be memorials for someone named Michael.

“Who’s Michael?” he asked his wife.
Andrew W. Lehren contributed reporting.

NYTimes Page 2 – Marine

She had tried to keep it from him. Specialist Michael Woodliff had been one of Mr. Huether’s recruits. Only 22 and engaged to be married, he was killed in Baghdad in April 2004 by a bomb that ripped through his Humvee.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Chip Litherland for The New York Times

Among those looking for him were the Vietnam veterans Charlie Shaughnessy, right, and Thomas McCarthy, known as Wolf.

[Reverberations of War](#)

Readers' Comments

Share your thoughts on this article.

- [Post a Comment »](#)
- [Read All Comments \(39\) »](#)

Mr. Huether immediately felt responsible.

“Emotionally, it was devastating,” Mr. Huether said. “He wasn’t just a number. He was a friend and fellow noncommissioned officer. Granted, he died doing what he loved. But I was the one that led him to it.”

The guilt, he said, had not gone away. In fact when he first heard that a local Iraq veteran was missing, he feared a replay of his experience with Specialist Woodliff.

“I was hoping I couldn’t put his name with a face,” he said. “I was just hoping — not again.”

Mr. Huether also knew he could not sit back and watch. Since retiring in August 2006 as a sergeant first class with 20 years of service, he has worked in the veterans’ service office for Charlotte County. He said it was his job and his sense of duty that prompted him to chase leads and scour the area’s waterways for a missing marine.

But he could only handle the water.

Searching the landscape of Florida, with its palm trees and sand, under hot sunny skies, felt too much like a step back in time and place to Iraq, where he served from January 2005 to February 2006. His children are now 16 and 19. He has a wife he loves and a job where he knows he can do some good for veterans. He just could not put his home life at risk.

“It wasn’t a matter of abandonment,” Mr. Huether said. “I was afraid of winding up in the same situation.”

The Vietnam Veterans

Charlie Shaughnessy; Thomas McCarthy, known as Wolf; Jerry Lutz, known as Animal; and Bob Constabile were strangers before Eric Hall disappeared. Each had been a marine. Each had fought in Vietnam and struggled with the consequences.

Animal and Wolf, who still prefer their Vietnam nicknames, struggled with homelessness. Mr. Shaughnessy spent four years living without electricity in the woods of upstate New York before rejoining society. And even then, he said, he overcame the experience only with intense therapy.

“The military has an effect on your life forever,” Mr. Shaughnessy said between cigarettes in his living room this month. “Forever.”

By the time these men reached Florida, they were busy trying to move on. Like so many here, they had come to retire, to check out — and Iraq in particular was not a war they identified with.

The military had changed, becoming an all-volunteer force in 1974. The number of troops dying in Iraq has never reached the heights of Vietnam. And as they watched Iraq war veterans coming home to parades and

public sympathy, many older veterans felt no need to link arms with younger colleagues. They watched Iraq like most Americans — as spectators.

But as the conflict dragged on, it became more familiar. When an increasing number of soldiers began coming home with post-traumatic stress, veterans like Mr. Shaughnessy and Mr. Constabile started to pay closer attention.

Mr. Hall's story capped their gradual awakening. He brought them together, they said, and inspired them to get involved.

"This is the first time I've had anything to do with veterans' anything," said Mr. Constabile, a retired painter from Kenosha, Wis., who moved to Florida seven years ago. "Now I want to know more."

During the search, he discovered that one of his grandsons had enlisted in the Army. Iraq had come a little closer. Mr. Hall's story and the search became a lesson he passed on.

"I want my grandkids to know life isn't all fun and games," he said.

Wolf and Mr. Shaughnessy in particular developed a tight and unexpected friendship. Comparing their experiences of war and its aftermath and joking about their ages (59 and 60, respectively), they often searched together in Wolf's silver Dodge pickup or on four-wheelers.

Andrew W. Lehren contributed reporting.

[More Articles in US »](#)

NYTimes March 31, 2008 Marine Page 3

When a tip came in about a young man with a limp, who sat on a bench next to an old woman, smelling as if he had not showered, they both "dressed homeless," as they put it — donning old clothes and sleeping in the homeless camps that dot the undeveloped land here behind cookie-cutter homes and fast-food restaurants.

They tried to stay positive even after Mr. Hall didn't turn up in the camps — or anywhere else. Four weeks into the search, he still hadn't materialized.

Mr. Shaughnessy — a squat, wide-chested, quiet soul with a Purple Heart hanging in his living room — kept worrying that they had missed something. He wondered, Why hadn't Eric used his A.T.M. card? Where could he have gone without his motorcycle?

With his new wife at home, Mr. Shaughnessy returned several times to the field by Sulstone Road near where the police found Mr. Hall's blue Yamaha R1 racing bike on Feb. 3, the day he disappeared. It was an area of palm trees, low brush and sandy trails not unlike the Euphrates River valley that Mr. Hall got to know during his time in Falluja — the kind of place Billy Huether sought to avoid.

On the night of March 6, Mr. Shaughnessy noticed something new — a scent coming from a metal drainage pipe three feet in diameter. The next morning, he crawled in, going 25 yards before the darkness and dirt forced him to squeeze back out.

A day later, he resubmerged with a combat knife and a flashlight, pushing forward on his belly for 60 long yards. He blocked out the smell, the mud, the maggots too, and desperately hoped to discover only a dead animal.

But once he reached the source, he saw what he feared — a skull and human jaw.

"I didn't say anything," he said, recounting what happened during an interview near the pipe. "I didn't want them to panic."

When he emerged, Mrs. Hall was there.

She asked, Is it Eric?

They locked eyes. Deep down, they already knew.

The Halls

When Eric Hall's parents talk about him before Iraq, two elements stand out: his tenaciousness and his love of the Marine Corps.

He was the skinny 12-year-old who played catcher on baseball teams with teenagers because he could always hold onto the ball when a runner slammed into home. And in the Marines, his family said he found his niche — a society where everyone was equal, without ranks on their combat uniforms.

A tour in Afghanistan from March to September 2004 introduced Mr. Hall to war. He went to Iraq next and on June 14, 2005, during a foot patrol in Anbar Province, an improvised explosive device blew up a few feet from him, changing his life forever. His parents described a brutal recovery at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., with as many as 20 operations. And when he returned home to Jeffersonville, Ind., a few months later, it was clear that his mind was wounded too.

"He didn't really sleep," said his mother, Becky Hall. "He woke up screaming. He kept a pistol under his pillow because he was afraid."

After being “medically retired” in June 2006, he found himself at home without a job and with friends who were especially interested in his pain medication. He came to Florida to live with a relative, seeking a fresh start. He disappeared only a few weeks after he arrived.

Mrs. Hall, 52, a physical therapist’s assistant, immediately moved into her sister’s home to manage the search.

The community response at times overwhelmed her with emotion.

Mrs. Hall found particular comfort in the Vietnam veterans, with their stories of struggle, of war and of its aftermath. Together, they even managed to laugh, in mud on four-wheelers or when she started ad-libbing her shouts to her son while searching, scolding him as if he were still a toddler.

“We were just so exhausted, it was ‘Come out, come out wherever you are,’ ” she said. “I just wanted to wring his little neck.”

Andrew W. Lehren contributed reporting.

NYTimes March 31, 2008 Page 4

Her toughness impressed the veterans. They called her “our commander.” She in turn cherished their dedication, which she suspected brought costs especially for Mr. Shaughnessy, who later said he was suffering again with nightmares of war.

[In Mosul, New Test of Iraqi Army \(March 20, 2008\)](#)

[Fateful Choice on Iraq Army Bypassed Debate \(March 17, 2008\)](#)

[Iraq’s Insurgency Runs on Stolen Oil Profits \(March 16, 2008\)](#)

Reach of War

Mr. Hall’s parents said they wished their son could have learned from such men. “If he got to talk to people like these, who experienced boots on the ground, it would have been a totally different story,” said his father, Kevin Hall.

Mr. Hall, 51, a maintenance supervisor at a local courthouse, stayed home during the search in case Eric Hall appeared. He arrived in Florida only after his son’s body had been identified. And with him came waves of grief.

On a hot morning in mid-March, he and his son Justin, 27, who flew from his Navy post in Virginia, visited for the first time the site where Eric Hall had died. They were accompanied by Mrs. Hall, Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Shaughnessy, who explained what he and the authorities thought had happened.

“I think Eric came here to collect his thoughts and smoked a cigarette, and that started a fire,” Mr. Shaughnessy said. “He climbed into the pipe for cover.”

Eric Hall’s father said later that his mind landed on the consequences of so much time underground. “After five, six weeks,” he said, “his body was pretty decomposed.”

He began to cry. “He loved that marine uniform. The first thought that hit me” — his shoulders shook with tears — “was that he wouldn’t be able to wear it.”

A few hundred yards away, Mrs. Hall and Wolf were hugging. He and Mr. Shaughnessy had volunteered to bring Eric Hall’s ashes to Indiana for the funeral.

“We’re coming up,” Wolf said.

Mrs. Hall looked up at him. “Oh, God love you,” she said.

In her hand, she held a flier with her son’s picture, smiling with his dog. She gently rubbed her fingers over the photograph.

“He’s with God and the other guys in the platoon,” she said. “You’re O.K. now Eric. It didn’t have to be so hard.”

- Then, putting on her large, dark sunglasses, she walked over to her last living son, comforting him as he crumpled in tears on the trunk of a sedan.

Andrew W. Lehren contributed reporting.