

Decade

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losses when the unit was hit with another tragedy the following spring.

SSG Greg Wagner died May 6, 2006, in a separate incident involving an explosive device. Wagner, a Mount Marty College (MMC) graduate, had been serving with the SDNG unit in Mitchell but was attached to the Yankton unit for the Iraq mission. Wagner's memory has been honored in a number of ways. MMC has raised \$23,000 so far for the Greg Wagner Memorial Scholarship, awarding \$700 each year. In addition, a monument was erected in his honor at the Hanson High School football field in his hometown of Alexandria. Also, an annual memorial run and baseball game are held in his honor.

The loss of the four soldiers, and Briest's life-changing injuries, received national attention. But the greatest daily impact may have been felt at the local and regional level, where family, friends and even strangers grieved, supported and celebrated Charlie Battery members and their families.

The impact remains felt on the 10th anniversary of those initial deaths, bringing painful memories but also a tremendous outpouring of pride and support. The emotions were seen in people whole lined the streets of Yankton for funeral processions. The sorrow turned to joy as an estimated 30,000 people – twice the number of Yankton residents – attended the yellow-ribbon parade welcoming home the unit in September 2006. The public would return once again to welcome home Briest when he arrived back in Yankton.

The *Press & Dakotan* reached out to family members and National Guard officials for their memories a decade later. Responses from widows Kay Schild and Melissa Cuka and brother Dan Wagner weren't received by the deadline for this story.

ALLEN KOKESH JR.

Ironically, Allen Kokesh Jr. had no intentions of following his father's footsteps and entering the military.

Allen Kokesh Sr. was serving in Germany when his son was born in 1984. The family returned to Yankton in 1986, and Allen Jr. lived in the community the rest of his life. He graduated from Yankton High School and was taking general courses at the University of South Dakota. He was a lifelong member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Yankton.

Allen Jr. had seen the military life while growing up and didn't find it to his liking, his father said.

"I remember when he was 16, he told me that he would never go in the military and to not even attempt to try and persuade him that it could be a possibility," Allen Sr. said of his son. "Then, something between then and age 17 1/2 changed him. I'm thinking it's what happened on 9/11. (Joining the military) was more for his family and friends and community, but it's also for your country."

Because Allen Jr. was younger than 18, he needed a parent's signature to enter the National Guard.

Allen Sr. spoke frankly with his son about the probability of serving in combat. "I made sure he knew what that (deployment) could mean, and he still wanted to do it," the elder Kokesh said.

Allen Jr. showed athletic prowess and determination while attending YHS, which would seem to serve him well on a deployment.

He collected numerous awards in a variety of sports. "It seemed that, no matter what he tried to do, he had the skills and ability to give it a good go," his father said.

Allen Jr. played on the YHS football team that won the 2002 state championship

team with a 13-0 record – the most single season wins for a football team in state history.

Allen Jr. also excelled in wrestling as the Bucks won the Eastern South Dakota (ESD) Conference championship. He would normally wrestle at 171 pounds, but he cut weight to make 160 pounds and fill a team need.

"It took a lot of willpower on Allen's part, because he really liked to eat," his father said.

But those happy moments during high school gave way to the horror of learning Allen Jr. was injured in the Baghdad attack on his SDNG mission.

Allen Jr. suffered extensive injuries and was transported to the United States for medical care. His father traveled to San Antonio and planned to remain by the young soldier's side.

"I told him I would stay down there until he came home, even if it took a year," Allen Sr. said.

After a month, Allen Sr. considered whether it might be better for him to return home, at least for a time.

"I asked Allen if I should leave, and he told me, 'No, I love you, Dad,'" the elder Kokesh said.

At that time, Allen Sr. was left with the decision of how to tell his son about his fellow Charlie Battery soldiers involved in the IED explosion.

"I didn't tell him about the other fallen soldiers the first month," Allen Sr. said. "When I told him that Rich and Dan were gone, he was crestfallen. I also told him that Corey had gotten hurt."

Even with his own pain, Allen Jr.'s thoughts never strayed far from his Charlie Battery brothers.

"The chaplain used to come to his room in Texas and ask Allen if he wanted (the chaplain) to pray for him," the elder Kokesh said. "Allen asked that the chaplain pray for the guys still over there (in Iraq). I think he missed them a lot. He thought a lot of those guys and would have liked to be there with his unit."

During their time together in San Antonio, the Kokeshes talked about life and dreams for the future.

"Allen (Jr.) was going to take a trip to Mexico when he came home on leave, and he was going to take his girlfriend down there and ask her to marry him," the father said. "She got a chance to come down to San Antonio when he was hurt. The (happiest) I saw him while he was down in the hospital was when she showed up. They wanted to get married and were even looking at some rings."

But those dreams came to a tragic end when Allen Jr. developed complications and died. The elder Kokesh had seen his son fight for two months and was devastated at the turn of events.

"I thought Allen (Jr.) was going to live. I expected him to live," the father said. "There was no way I saw that the rug would be pulled out from under us."

Allen Sr. held on to one reminder of his late son. "When they were leaving the Sioux Falls airport to go to Fort Dix (New Jersey) to train, I gave him my dog tags that I wore when I was in the military," the elder Kokesh said. "When I gave him my dog tags, I told him there were a lot of sweat, blood and tears with those (tags). He should make sure he brought them back home. I saw (the tags) in his personal effects, so I kept one of them and gave the other to my son who was training in the Army."

Allen Jr.'s funeral was held at Trinity Lutheran, and the family found two signs of public support upon leaving the services. The procession route was lined with supporters and some of them started throwing yellow roses into the streets.

Allen Jr. was buried at Garden of Memories Cemetery, as were Cuka and Schild. The three National Guard brothers were reunited.

"I think (Allen Jr.) had a

bright future ahead of him," his father said. "But this was the path he had chosen where he was basically protecting his country and its freedom."

The younger Kokesh received a posthumous promotion to sergeant. In addition, he and the other fallen or injured soldiers were recognized in the yellow ribbon parade at the unit's homecoming.

A decade later, Allen Sr. said it remained difficult to talk about losing his son. However, he was glad to see the *Press & Dakotan* article remembering those who sacrificed for their country.

"I always thought of Allen (Jr.) as my champion," he said. "It's so hard to explain. You never expected to lose the son that was going to protect the family."

For Allen Sr., time has stood still in some ways and life hasn't necessarily gone on.

"Has it been 10 years?" he asked. "It's more like a time warp. There are some days when it could have been yesterday, and some days you don't even think it happened."

RICH SCHILD

For Brooks Schild, the plan was for his brother, Rich, and him to watch out for each other during their dangerous mission in Iraq. They even shared a room during the week before Rich's death.

"We had good conversations for those five or six days (before the attack)," Brooks said. "Then, I had to go back to the room (after my brother's death) and there was Rich's stuff."

Brooks felt overwhelmed at first with the sight, but he knew the rightful place for one item. "Our mom had sent a rosary, so I placed the rosary in Rich's hands (for his funeral)."

Brooks escorted his brother's body on the flights home. Rich was taken to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, and Brooks flew to Baltimore and then Philadelphia but was determined to rejoin his brother.

"I was supposed to stay in Philly for four days, but I rented a car and drove to Dover," Brooks said. "While I was there, I drove to Walter Reed (Medical Center) to see Corey and Jenny (Briest)."

When it was time to transport Rich's body for the final trip home, Brooks rode in the same black Suburban making the ride to the airport.

"I told the driver that Rich and I were always going to visit Washington, D.C., and see all the memorials," Brooks said. "When the driver heard this was my brother, he went through D.C. and took us by all the memorials."

The Schilds were on the same commercial flight to Minneapolis. Upon landing, the stewardess told the other passengers to remain seated so a soldier on the flight could depart first and escort his fallen brother.

"The passengers were looking through the windows. I'm sure some were wondering what was happening," Brooks said. "I stayed with Rich when they took him off the tarmac."

The Schilds arrived at the Sioux Falls airport around 11:30 p.m. in the midst of an ice storm and foggy night. Brooks was greeted by SDNG officer Shane Toupal of Yankton, a state trooper and Tammy Keller driving the hearse for the Opsahl-Kostel Funeral Home of Yankton.

Brooks rode along in the hearse, and the ride attained a top speed of 40 miles per hour because of the treacherous conditions. The Yankton County sheriff's office met the hearse at Gayville, and the Yankton Police Department escorted the hearse into town.

"The weather was so bad, we had to drive up the middle of two lanes," Brooks said. "When we got into Yankton, there wasn't one car on the streets."

Rich's coffin was draped with the U.S. flag during the funeral Mass, Brooks said. Sacred Heart Catholic Church was packed, and the family found another overwhelming show of support for the procession to the cemetery.

"When we left Sacred Heart and went down Douglas (Avenue), you saw a solid street of people. It was freezing, but people were standing along the route and showing American flags," Brooks said. "(My wife) Joan and I cried. It was so different than when we brought Rich into town and there was no one there."

Cuka received a similar show of respect following his funeral, Brooks said. "When Dan was buried, and they went down Broadway (Avenue to the cemetery) and it was just solid," he said, adding the scene was repeated for Kokesh's funeral.

However, not everyone showed respect for the fallen soldiers. Members of the controversial Westboro Baptist Church came to Yankton and picketed a memorial service for Cuka and Schild at the Summit Activities Center.

But counter-demonstrators confronted the Westboro group and shielded the two soldiers' families from the sight. The local group included students who were released from classes to accommodate the memorial service but returned to counter the Westboro demonstrators.

"We were appalled (Westboro) would do such a thing, but the students kept it a positive rally," Brooks said. "The students did their best to prevent (Westboro) from disrupting and disturbing the (soldiers') families. Our group out-shouted the other side, who just left."

Charlie Battery's sorrow continued in the coming months with the loss of Kokesh and Wagner. However, the grief turned to joy with Charlie Battery's return in September. The deactivation ceremony was held afterward in the YHS auditorium.

"Yankton and the surrounding communities rallied for all of us. The parade — I never experienced anything like it in my life. We got the recognition that every soldier in the nation should have gotten (after each war)," he said. "It was overwhelming to ride a float and see 30,000 people welcome you home. It brings a smile to my face when I remember all the people on the street. Any soldier would have a tear and get emotional at seeing that support. There were a lot of great things that were done for us. Only in Yankton and our surrounding area would you have that kind of response."

Ten years later, the soldiers and their families continue receiving support, Brooks said. Rich Schild's memory has been honored with the River Rat Marathon in April. In addition, Rich's friends in Tabor and neighboring communities have launched the annual Rich Schild Memorial Fireworks display kicking off Czech Days each June.

In addition, the Briests are working with the Wounded Warriors project, Brooks said. The Yankton unit has played a key role in the Global War On Terror (GWOT) as it was called up three times and served two overseas deployments. The unit served 2 1/2 years in missions during a five-year span.

Rich Schild's family and friends also gather to celebrate his Nov. 29 birthday. "Rich would have turned 50 last Sunday. We told 'Rich' stories and had a toast to Rich," Brooks said.

Charlie Battery plans to hold a reunion next fall with its monthly drill to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the unit's homecoming from Iraq.

Brooks doesn't want people to forget the mission or the need to protect freedom.

"I hope people remember this Charlie Battery was a great unit and represented the people of South Dakota well," he said. "It was a difficult mission in a danger-

ous place. We recognize the losses we suffered, but we also recognize the need to safeguard the community."

COREY BRIEST

A decade later, Jenny Briest says the war continues to impact the lives of the Charlie Battery soldiers and their families.

"I think it's very important to remember not only the (fallen) soldiers but their families. They're still grieving 10 years later," she said. "It's especially difficult this time of year with the holidays coming up."

Jenny considers herself fortunate that her husband returned home from Iraq. However, Corey struggles daily, as do other wounded warriors, she said. And in their own ways, other soldiers and their families can go through difficult moments.

The Briests look at Dec. 4 not only as the day of the IED explosion but also the day in which Corey remained alive and began his journey back home.

"Every Dec. 4, we look at it as a celebration for us. We look at what Corey has accomplished (in recovering from his injuries)," she said. "We have invited the Guards, but it's still too hard for some of them to come."

The Briests have become nationally known through appearances on "60 Minutes," "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and television commercials. They have also made personal appearances at school assemblies, veterans meetings and other events.

They hope they can provide a face – and a voice – for veterans and their needs. They work with retreats for caregivers and a long-term care support fund should a veteran need finances for such care.

In addition, Corey has been involved in an independent living program. The Briests are also raising their children, who are now 13 and 11 years old. A year-long fund drive raised \$250,000 both locally and nationally to build an accessible home for Corey's needs.

"Things completely changed (with Corey's injuries). You went from not having a care in the world to having huge responsibilities. You grow up fast," Jenny said. "But I couldn't have asked for a better community and state for people always backing us up. We tell our story at different places, and people can't believe it."

Wounded Warriors and other outlets have provided crucial support, Jenny said. "The major thing, you never have the feeling of being alone," she said. "It was the hardest feeling at first, just feeling you were alone. But the support from the community and knowing they were there for us has been the biggest thing."

In turn, the Briests never forget the fallen soldiers and hold fond memories of them, Jenny said.

"When we're talking at home, Corey is constantly telling stories about them. Their names come up, and he gets a smile on his face," she said. "You need to remember them and honor them for all they have done."

HONORING THEIR MEMORIES

Ten years ago, then-Maj. Orson Ward served as the public affairs officer for the South Dakota National Guard. He had served with the 153rd Engineer Battalion during its mission in Iraq when the unit suffered a casualty.

"Being there (in combat) and understanding and seeing that, it was the real

deal," he said. "There was an immediate feeling of loss and wanting to protect one another."

But with the war on terror escalating and action intensifying, he prepared for the possibility – even the expectation – of dealing with more casualties.

"It was reality for everyone that we were going to be losing these amazing soldiers and possibly airmen," said Ward, now a lieutenant colonel and the SDNG planning and policy officer.

Ward wanted not only to disseminate accurate information but also to help families deal with their loss and tell their stories to the media.

"It's tough to balance that out. I met people (for the first time), and it was the worst (moment of their lives). You try to lend a hand the best you could," he said. "We really did want to tell their story. We wanted to honor those people, what they did and what they went through."

Ward helped organize local press conferences, where the families could answer questions and tell their stories one time for all the media.

"There are a lot of raw emotions, and things could really unravel in telling their story," he said. "But you definitely don't want to filter that out. People should know how much it hurt (to lose those soldiers)."

Ward expressed gratitude for the sensitivity generally shown by the South Dakota media when dealing with the families of fallen and injured soldiers.

"It's one thing to have parades and speeches and to send off our soldiers. But then to lose a soldier, it became something very different," he said. "I was apprehensive because I didn't know how it was going to go. I'm so thankful our community media was equally sensitive in trying to tell that story."

Ward said he felt pride in representing the SDNG, its members and their families.

"When you look 10 years ago, one word that comes to mind is resiliency. This was a hardy bunch that took losses and remained resilient," he said. "We need to recognize the sacrifices and remember what this state, and particularly these communities in Yankton and the surrounding area, had paid."

The SDNG soldiers are missed because they come mostly from the local area and fill important roles in the community, Ward said. When they deploy, their absence is noticed on a daily basis, he added.

That concern continues when the soldiers return home, he said. "We have a very strong sense of community and look out for one another. If there's someone hurting, and there is a need, the community steps up," he said.

A decade later, the war on terror continues with SDNG units still serving overseas, Ward said. Recent national and world events point to the ongoing nature of threats against the United States and the SDNG's role in confronting threats to national security.

"We all need to stay resilient and hyper-vigilant," he said. "What we are seeing is just a reminder of what is going on all around us. This (war on terror) is far from over."

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