

Feature

Families worry about kin in gulf

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Before leaving Fort Benning, Ga., where they saw off their 19-year-old son, John, for U.S. Army duty in Saudi Arabia, Michael and Billie Martina of Dansville made John an offer.

"I said, half-jokingly, 'John, would you like to go home with us and we'll take you up to Canada?'" Billie Martina recalled. Her son — a private in the 197th Infantry Brigade — declined the offer, saying that serving in Operation Desert Shield was his job.

Billie Martina's half-joke belies a constant concern for the life of her son — a concern that grows as each day brings the world closer to the United Nations' Jan. 15 deadline for an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. After that date, the allied armies arrayed against Saddam Hussein have U.N. authorization to forcibly expel him from Kuwait if necessary.

Although his wife Billie is worried, Michael Martina — who serves in the Army National Guard — does not believe his son will be marching toward Iraq on Jan. 16. "I think in the end (Saddam) is going to back down and he's going to get out," the St. Mary's parishioner said. "He's going to talk tough all the way, but in the end, he'll back down."

Martina's words express not only his hunch, but also the hope of millions of Americans this holiday season. Concern for the hundreds of families that count one or more relatives among the hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia has spurred many parishes throughout the Diocese of Rochester to offer regular liturgical prayers and/or prayer services for the military personnel abroad.



Collage by Babette G. Augustin

Some Catholic schools are sending packages and letters to troops in the Persian Gulf. One such school is St. Mary's in Dansville, whose students have "adopted" the C Company, 25th Signal Battalion, of the U.S. Army.

Each Friday, the school sends out about 80 letters and drawings to the company, whose commander, Wanda Toro, wrote to the students after her troops had received from the school letters addressed to "Any U.S. Service Person."

Martha Wilson, St. Mary's fifth-grade teacher, said the idea for the letter-writing campaign came from Carrie LaBell, one of her students, who had seen a newspaper advertisement listing an address to which people could write a service person.

After sending off batches of letters for more than a month, Jasmine Lewis, one of LaBell's classmates, reported that Sergeant Mike Pollard of C Company had written her back. Lewis said Pollard's letter included these words:

"Hopefully, there will be a peaceful solution to this mess ... war is a terrible thing, but not the most terrible thing. War is not as terrible as living a life in which you have nothing you believe in to fight for."

Yet some families back home are debating just what the United States is planning to fight for should war break out in the gulf.

Susan Stehling, a parishioner at St. Patrick's in Victor, is organizing a group

called Military Families Support Network, with the dual objective of providing moral support for the troops in Saudi Arabia while lobbying the government to bring them home. Stehling, the mother-in-law of Army Infantryman David Mistretta, believes what the United States really plans to fight for are "greed and power."

"President (George) Bush has been very inconsistent with the reasons we're there," Stehling said. "Had the troops not been so prematurely deployed without the consent of Congress, we wouldn't be involved there now."

Nevertheless, Stehling stressed the importance of letting the troops know that Americans support them. She and her daughter, Susan Mistretta, David's wife, have been decorating a Christmas tree in their local post office with paper camels bearing the addresses of service personnel. The mother-daughter team has been putting up an average of 100 paper camels each day, which, Stehling said, are quickly taken down.

The mother and daughter have also turned to their parish for support in the midst of the crisis. Every Saturday morning after the 7:45 Mass, they and 30 to 45 other participants have been attending St. Patrick's 20-minute ecumenical prayer service for peace.

Susan Mistretta said she finds it painful to be separated from her husband at this time because they met only last year and were married just seven days before he left

for Saudi Arabia in August. "A part of me is gone with him," she said.

Mistretta shares her mother's hopes for peace and a disdain for President Bush's policy. "People are so against war, any war. (Bush) doesn't seem to be listening to people," she said.

Although David Mistretta's letters convey the attitude that "if we're going to fight, let's fight," his wife said fighting is the last thing she wants to see him do. Noting that her faith has kept her optimistic about a peaceful resolution, she said hope is what gets her through the day at the FF Thompson Hospital where she's a registered nurse.

"You can't be pessimistic," she said. "I don't think I could go through work if I felt that way at all."

John and Mary Bond expressed similar sentiments about the possibility of war in the Persian Gulf — a war that would involve their 25-year-old son, Nicholas, a lance corporal and mechanic in the U.S. Marine Corps.

A parishioner at St. Mary of the Lake/St. Benedict in Watkins Glen, Mary Bond acknowledged that having a child serving in the region affects her view toward President Bush's policy.

"The personal thing certainly clouds your attitude," she said. "I think (Bush) could maybe bend a little more to get peace."

The Bonds said their son had written them and complained of being unable to practice his Catholic faith, a practice which is technically banned by the Saudis. "He says that (religious services are) something they really need," John Bond said.

Mary Bond said her son had also written of the troops' hard life in the desert. "They're bored, and they're confined to a small area where they can't relax and get away," she said.

Like David Mistretta, the Bonds' son seems to be growing tired of being stationed in the gulf. "He wishes that they could just come home and be done with it," John Bond observed. "They evidently don't get a lot of firsthand news (about the actions of Bush and Saddam), which is unfortunate because they rely on hearsay."

As for peace, John Bond said his son is "hopeful, but he's not overtly hopeful. He's prepared to go to war."

Mary Bond praised her parish's effort to pray for the men and women overseas at Sunday and Wednesday Masses. The Bonds noted that some people in the parish have written to their son since the publication in their church bulletin of his address and those of other parishioners serving in the gulf.

"Nick wrote to me that he'd heard from kids that he knew back in school," Mary Bond remarked.

The prayers and letters from people at home means a great deal to the troops

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