

Young widow remembers a warrior

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

FARMINGTON — Army National Guardsman Sgt. Heath A. McMillin of Canandaigua was sent to Iraq one week before the war officially ended in May. However, the war was just beginning for him.

"It seemed like the war went too smoothly," McMillin's wife, Kelly, said of the U.S.-led coalition's victory. "I remember watching it (on TV) and thinking this is far from over."

Kelly said that her 29-year-old husband was assigned to protect a supply road into Baghdad. In phone conversations, Heath told his wife that his unit was repeatedly attacked. Nonetheless, Kelly sensed that her husband was downplaying the dangers he faced.

"He didn't tell me a lot about the things he saw over there," said Kelly, who attends St. Dominic's Parish in Shortsville.

In a phone call to Kelly and her family on July 25, she noted that he was in a reflective mood.

"He was tired and scared and just had had it," she said, adding that he was moved by the Iraqis' poverty. "He said, 'These (Iraqis) have nothing but their families. I'm so lucky because I have my family and so much at home.'"

Among the family he had at home were a son in California and a daughter in New York he had before he met Kelly, as well as his son with her, Michael, who is now 15 months old.

Kelly said that Heath was also upset because he couldn't be in New York for her sister's wedding the next day. Then, on July 27, the day after the wedding, a family member called Kelly at her parents' house in Farmington and told her two "military men" had contacted her looking for Kelly.

"I had a terrible feeling," she said. "I don't know too much about military stuff, but I know they don't send two guys if someone is just hurt."

Her fears were confirmed when she was informed her husband had been killed. A remote-controlled explosive device on the side of the road had detonated as the vehicle in which he was traveling passed. A fellow sol-



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Kelly McMillin holds a photo of her husband, Heath, holding their son, Michael, during the child's baptism. Heath was killed in Iraq this past July. Michael is now 15 months old.

dier was wounded in the attack.

Heath's funeral several days later at St. Mary's Church in Canandaigua drew a standing-room-only crowd, Kelly said. She added that Father Daniel J. Condon, her cousin and chancellor of the Diocese of Rochester, played a key role in comforting her and her loved ones.

"He's just a wonderful guy, and I was very privileged to have him help us with Heath's service," she said of Father Condon.

Kelly met Heath two-and-a-half years ago, and spoke about the difficulty of losing him so quickly. Her husband had hopes of converting to Catholicism one day, she said, and

the couple had planned to renew their marriage vows in church this coming May.

"Heath and I didn't talk about where he wanted to be buried," she said.

Thanksgiving this year was somewhat difficult for her, she added, because Heath was an avid sportsman who enjoyed rising early on the holiday to hunt. Her faith has sustained her, she noted, but she said that she has had her moments of doubt. She added that an aunt told her: "It's OK to be mad at God. You're going to be mad for a while. You'll find your way back."

Part of what has helped her find her way back is the way family, friends and community members have expressed their support for her, she said. She added that her son is also a boon.

"He's a miracle to me, and I thank God for him every day," she said. "He's the reason I can get out of bed every day and smile and laugh."

Her parents, Francis and Sally Crowley, have also been a great support, she said, inviting her and her baby to live with them after Heath's death. They also purchased a flag pole in his honor that has been erected on the grounds of St. Dominic's. She added that she keeps in contact with Heath's family, and has visited his grave with his 7-year-old daughter, who lives with her mother in a neighboring community.

Meanwhile, Kelly said she has accepted her husband's death. Heath had served in the Marines prior to serving in the National Guard, she said, and was a military man through and through. As daunting as the conditions in Iraq were, she said, her husband went anyway.

"He knew it was his duty."

Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580)
Vol. 115 No. 12 December 18, 2003
Published weekly except the first Thursday in January and the last Thursday in December. Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices: 1136 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14624. 585/529-9530. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, NY.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, PO Box 24379, Rochester, NY 14624.



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