

Losses, gains: The war in Iraq

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Catholic Courier recently interviewed a number of Catholics about their views on the war that has led to Iraq's new government.*

In their Brighton home, Nicole, 3, and Dominique, 4, proudly displayed photographs of their father holding each of them in his arms.

"I'm going to get a frame for my picture!" Dominique said. Just as the bubbly siblings were whisked off to bed by their grandmother, Cathy Pernaselli, Nicole announced that she, too, was going to get a frame.

Then Cathy's husband, John, began to talk about the couple's son — and the children's father — U.S. Navy Petty Officer First Class Michael Pernaselli.

"Michael was military-minded," John said of the 1995 McQuaid Jesuit High School graduate. "Everything he did, he did to his fullest extent."

Michael Pernaselli died April 24 in a suicide boat attack while patrolling the waters around an oil terminal in Iraq. Awarded both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star posthumously, Michael — who was killed along with another sailor and a Coast Guard member — was credited by the Navy for preventing "massive casualties." According to his citation, his confrontation of the attacking boat alerted U.S. forces to two other hostile boats that were then destroyed.

John and Cathy Pernaselli, parishioners at Brighton's Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, are raising Michael's children. She opposes the U.S.-led war in Iraq; he supports it. Nonetheless, they are united in their grief and in their desire to "support the troops." John added that he has

no problem with those criticizing the war; he just wants them to do it civilly. He said he's irritated by celebrities who voice their opposition to the war by taking personal shots at President George W. Bush.

"Michael and almost 900 people died so that (celebrities) could stay in this country and make their money, and he protected people like me and you," he said with emotion.

PICTURES OF WAR

S. John Wilkin was a staff photographer for the *Catholic Courier* from 1994-96. Currently a photographer for the *Times-Leader* in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Wilkin was an embedded journalist in Kuwait and Iraq Feb. 9 through May 5, photographing Pennsylvania National Guardsmen serving in the area.

"Sometimes it all seemed a little surreal," Wilkin said of his experiences.

Whether covering a patrol in the streets of Sadr City in Baghdad, or enduring rocket and mortar attacks on his camp, Wilkin said danger was constantly on his mind. While the politics of war might occupy the minds of Americans at home, he noted that the soldiers he photographed focused simply on doing their jobs and getting home safely to their families. Wilkin said he believes most Iraqis want U.S. forces to leave, but that he thought the country would spin out of control if they did.

"It's now a battle for a democratic, sovereign Iraq with insurgents who would like to set up a Taliban-style rule," he said.

He said it's too early to tell if the experiment in Iraqi democracy is going to work.



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In this April 9 photo taken by S. John Wilkin, Spc. Scott Domanowski of the 109th Field Artillery, Bravo Battery, begins a 12-hour shift guarding the Al-Rashad Police Station as twilight sets in Iraq.

"I spoke with an Iraqi interpreter who lived in Iraq his whole life and served in the military under Saddam (Hussein)," Wilkin said. "His main point was that he didn't think Americans quite understood that if Iraq is going to be a democratic country, it's simply going to take a very long time."

PLEAS FOR PEACE

Some Catholics want the diocesan church to do more to oppose the U.S. role in Iraq, and war in general. Dozens of them met at Rochester's Corpus Christi Church in early June and later that month at the Roman Catholic Center in Geneva to discuss ways of calling the diocese to effectively witness against war and violence. Organizers compiled the comments of those who attended, and the Rochester contingent has already sent its recommendations for action to Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

Among the many suggestions made by meeting participants was a call for the diocese to dedicate a year to the study of nonviolence and provide educational retreats, seminars and resources on that subject for young people and adults.

Father Jim Hewes, pastor of the parishes of St. John's, Clyde, and St. Patrick's, Savannah, moderated the discussions. A consistent-life-ethic activist who is diocesan coordinator for the post-abortion ministry Project Rachel, Father Hewes said he believes both war and abortion go against the Gospel nonviolence of Jesus. Pointing to the recently revealed abuses in U.S.-run Iraqi prisons as an example, he said war can corrupt those who are called to wage it.

"This incredible destruction we are unleashing on our society ... will leave a tremendous wound and

problem for years and years to come," he said.

Along with others, Father Hewes questioned the church's acceptance of the just-war theory, which holds that war is permissible under certain circumstances. He noted that Jesus never raised an army, taught a love for enemies and always did good even to those who hated him, including the man whose ear Peter cut off in the Garden of Gethsemane.

"(Jesus) heals ... the very man who was there to crucify him on the cross," Father Hewes said.

The Pernasellis, meanwhile, expressed love of their enemies in a particularly poignant way. They noted that they wouldn't wish what happened to them on their worst foes. But they said they have been comforted by the enormous outpouring of support from their parish, McQuaid, veterans' groups, the Navy and people in general who have learned of their loss. One anonymous donor has even paid for the Catholic schooling of Michael's children, Cathy said.

The Pernasellis said they greatly appreciate the comfort, but struggle with the fact that their 27-year-old son was taken from them. To add to their concerns, they noted that another of their sons, John, is an Iraq War veteran and Army captain who may be redeployed to Iraq.

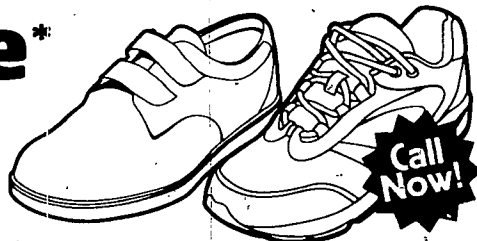
Cathy said she simply can't watch the television news anymore, especially broadcasts about casualties in Iraq. However, she does have a dream, a favor she wishes to extend to her late son: She wants to scatter his ashes over the Atlantic Ocean someday.

"I figure this way he'll get to see the places he never got to see," she said of the late sailor. "He'll always be in motion, not stuck in one place."

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