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The Sacramento Bee

THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 2008 **

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FINAL EDITION

50 CENTS

After Iraq explosion, grief again shrouds the foothills

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In a war that in the past week has reached more grim milestones – 4,000 dead, five years of combat – it was one perished soul, one fateful and horrific day that returned anguish to the foothills of El Dorado County.

Army Staff Sgt. Michael D. Elledge was No. 3,991 – perhaps 3,990 – one of

two U.S. soldiers who died March 17 in Iraq.

Elledge, a former capital area resident, was killed by a makeshift bomb that tore through his armored Humvee on a stretch of road north of Baghdad.

“My first question is, ‘Why?’ I want his life to mean something,” said his wife, Carleen, a native of Sacramento who also has roots in Placerville. “I

know God took him for a reason. I don’t know what that is yet.”

Today, a hearse will take her husband’s casket from Sacramento International Airport to the Chapel of the Pines in Placerville, where an afternoon service will be held.

He will rest in a slice of what he surely thought of as God’s country, in the
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Soldier: He died two days before war’s anniversary

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woods and knolls of a Placerville cemetery he visited years ago with his wife.

“I’m a military wife. We live day by day. I didn’t even know it was the week of the war’s fifth anniversary. We live moment to moment and pray everyday that our husbands will come home safely,” she said.

The military has said it has turned a corner in Iraq, citing a decline in violence and death.

Elledge, 41, and the father of three, was in his second tour. He believed the worst was over, his wife said.

“He really did think they were making a difference this time, with the Iraqi people. The first time he went, he didn’t see it so much.... He did feel he was doing something good over there.”

Michael Elledge died in the passenger seat of his Humvee while returning to his outpost near one of the dust-colored suburbs north of Baghdad. An EFP, an explosively formed projectile, also killed his gunner, Cpl. Christopher C. Simpson, 23, of Hampton, Va., who last week was posthumously promoted to sergeant.

Elledge died just two days before the war’s March 19 anniversary. A few days later, last Sunday, March 23, the war had reached another marker: The U.S. death toll in Iraq reached

4,000. By Wednesday, the toll had reached 4,003.

El Dorado County has given three of its own to Iraq and Afghanistan – the most recent in December when Army Sgt. Kyle Dayton, 22, of El Dorado Hills died Dec. 3 in Ashwah, Iraq, from a noncombat incident.

Army Pfc. Matthew Taylor, 21, of Cameron Park died Sept. 26 from a roadside bomb that went off July 23 in Afghanistan.

On April 12, 2004, Lance Cpl. Brad Shuder, 21, of El Dorado was killed by hostile fire in Iraq’s Anbar province.

“You hear all about these boys going and dying, and you feel in your heart for them and their families. When it’s someone you know and did things with, it really hits home,” said Mary Waterman of Shingle Springs, who was in the Elledges’ wedding.

For each war casualty mentioned in the news, there are lives, said Rose Chilcoat, who belongs to an El Dorado County support group for families with loved ones in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“They are not numbers. They are human beings. They are sons, daughters, husbands, wives and they have families,” she said.

Since the start of the Iraq war, at least 62 troops from Northern California have died. In all, 426 men and women across the

state have died in Iraq.

The Pentagon lists Elledge as among Indiana’s war dead. Placerville, however, will count him as one of its own.

Casualty numbers mean little to Carleen Elledge and other military families. “We don’t really like to count, because it doesn’t matter,” she said.

Even so, she monitored the toll, keeping tabs from afar on icasualties.org, a Web site that keeps tally.

“When Mike was in Iraq, I looked at that Web site everyday. I looked to see if the next one was my husband.”

That’s not how the military delivers its grim news. She was met at the door by men in uniforms.

Elledge enlisted with the Marines after high school in Indiana. He met Carleen in San Francisco, where he wound up and got a job with United Airlines.

The couple moved to Sacramento, where he attended Sacramento City College to get an airline mechanic’s license.

In 1997, the couple moved to Indianapolis to work in United Airlines’ new maintenance facility.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, fewer people flew, and United went into a tailspin. He lost his job in 2003 – the year the United States invaded Iraq.

In 2005, at 37, he re-enlisted. The Air Force would not take him. Because of his age, neither would the Navy and the Marines.

“He knew when he signed up that he would probably have to do a tour in Iraq,” Carleen Elledge said. He started his first yearlong deployment to Iraq in November 2005.

There would be a fateful second tour, starting last December. That’s when he decided military life didn’t mix well with family life.

“Not that he hated the Army,” she said. “He liked what he did. He would have stayed in it longer, if not for the fact that he could have had a third deployment.”

He was a religious man who led a Bible study group in Iraq. He rose early to walk and pray in the woods at home, his wife said, to reflect on God, life and family.

Before heading to Iraq for a second tour, he and Carleen spoke of all the unpleasant things they avoided the first time.

“The first time, we didn’t prepare at all. This particular time, we were much more aware of the dangers.”

They sat down with the checklist given to them by the military. “One part asked about where he wants to be buried.”



Elledge family photo

Staff Sgt. Michael Elledge heads home in November 2006 after his first Iraq tour. He was killed March 17 during his second tour.

He knew that should he not return alive, Carleen would return to California with their children, ages 3 and 5. He had an 18-year-old son from a previous marriage. In death, “he wanted us to be able to visit him,” his wife said.

He chose the cemetery in Placerville, where Carleen’s grandparents are buried.

“He fell in love with the place,” she said. “He said he wanted lots of trees, grassy hills.”



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