

Don't miss a single issue of the Free Riders Press SUBSCRIBE TODAY!!!

A Sad Anniversary - Remembering Matt

09 April, 2006

Family, friends still cling to hope 2 years after Matt Maupin's capture in Iraq

Carolyn and Keith Maupin know that of all the untold thousands of Americans who pray each day for the safe return of their son, Sgt. Matt Maupin, the only U.S. soldier listed as captive in Iraq, there are none who feel his absence more deeply than a small band of soldiers in Illinois.

They are the soldiers of the 724th Transportation Company, the U.S. Army reserve unit headquartered in Bartonville, Ill. It is a unit unique among the hundreds of Reserve and National Guard units that have served in the Iraq war. Theirs is the only one that has returned home not knowing the fate of one of their comrades.

"Matt is very strongly on everyone's mind, every day," said Staff Sgt. Michael Bailey, 49, a veteran of the 724th whose own son served alongside him during the unit's year-long deployment to Iraq. "Especially now. Especially this week."

Two years ago today, the then-20-year-old Maupin - not far-removed from his days as a Glen Este High School football player - became the face that thousands in his native Union Township and across the nation have associated with the war in Iraq.

Maupin, then carrying the patch of a specialist on his desert camouflage uniform, was one of 10 soldiers from the 724th assigned to provide security for private contractors making a 40-mile run from Balad to the Baghdad International Airport in a 26-vehicle convoy. As the convoy neared the airport, the civilian truck drivers and the Army Reservists ran into a hail of gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades from both sides of the road. The trucks - many of them burning - plowed through the chaos for nearly five miles. By the time soldiers from the nearby 1st Cavalry Division rescued the survivors, six civilians were dead and nine injured. One soldier of the 724th, Spc. Greg Goodrich, lay dead on the road; the body of another, Sgt. Elmer Kraus, was found nearby several days later.

What happened to Maupin was unknown until a week later, when a video surfaced on the Arabic TV station Al-Jazeera showing Maupin surrounded by five hooded men holding automatic rifles.

A grainy video surfaced in June 2004 showing a man being killed by insurgents. An exhaustive examination of the video by the Defense Department ended in a Pentagon statement saying the man's identification was "inconclusive." Since then, the Maupins - and the soldiers of the 724th - have waited for some word on Maupin.

Carolyn and Keith Maupin traveled to Fort McCoy, Wis., last February to be part of the welcome-home celebrations when 130 soldiers of the 724th returned from Iraq. For them, it was a bittersweet experience - a chance to share the joy of hundreds of 724th family members at seeing their loved ones, and a difficult reminder of their own uncertainty.

"I'll never forget the kindness, the concern they showed to us," Carolyn Maupin said of her trip to Wisconsin. "They are our military family."

Family, Bailey said, is just what the soldiers of the 724th consider Keith and Carolyn Maupin.

"They are the adopted mom and dad for every soldier in the unit," Bailey said.

Since their return from Iraq a year ago, the soldiers of the 724th report once each month for "drill weekend." The first thing they see as they file into the reserve center at Bartonville is a photograph of Matt Maupin in the foyer. Command Master Sgt. Eric Hill, "top dog" sergeant of one of the four platoons of the 724th in Iraq, looks at the face of the young man from Union Township every day; a framed photograph sits on his desk. It is there, Hill said, as a constant reminder "that we have one left behind. And that we can't rest until we get him back."

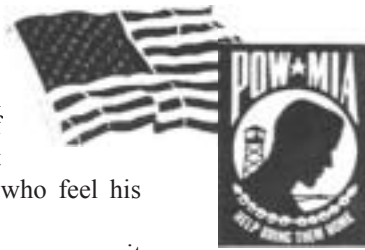
Hill said he and other members of the 724th have become good friends with the Maupins, although he said his earliest conversations with them were somewhat uncomfortable. "I felt like I was responsible for their son over there and I didn't bring him home," said Hill. "What do you say to them?"

But the Maupins, Hill said, made him feel at ease and their friendship has grown. Today, Hill is planning on being at the dinner-dance in Loveland the Maupins have organized to raise \$100,000 for a scholarship fund in the name of Matt and 28 soldiers and Marines from Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan.

All of the families of the 28 have been involved in the Maupins' Yellow Ribbon Support Center, a nonprofit organization that has sent thousands of packages, computers and equipment to troops overseas.

The 724th gets very little direct information on what U.S. forces in Iraq are doing to find Maupin, Hill said. Most of the unit's information comes from the Maupins themselves, who now have phone briefings every Friday night from a Pentagon official in the POW-MIA office.

Early on in their ordeal, the Maupins were frustrated by the fact that they heard little out of the Pentagon on the status of the search for their son. That changed in the summer of 2004 when Rob Portman, who was then their congressman, got involved.



Portman, now U.S. trade representative, used his connections with the Bush White House and his status as a congressman to "develop a personal relationship with the people responsible in the Pentagon."

"They had my cell-phone number and I had theirs," said Portman. "Anytime there was the slightest hint of information about Matt, I would get the call and pass it on to Keith and Carolyn."

On an official trip to Iraq, Portman said, he met with a group of soldiers who had been involved in searches for Maupin.

"I know they are out there looking every day," Portman said. "I just pray they can bring some news to these good people who have waited so long."

While they wait, the Maupins know they have support not only from the soldiers of the 724th but from people in the central Illinois towns that have produced many of Matt's 724th comrades.

Debi and Dennis Pickles live in the Illinois town of Glasford, just south of Bartonville. Neither has served in the military, but they devote much of their time to veterans service projects.

Today, while the Maupins are holding their scholarship dinner-dance in Loveland, the Pickles plan to lead a motorcycle procession from the 724th's Reserve center to a cemetery in nearby Peoria, where a Matt Maupin vigil will be held. Wreaths will also be laid, Debi Pickles said, for the two soldiers who died in the convoy attack.

"I met the Maupins when they came here to visit the Reserve center," Pickles said. "They are good people. They bear this burden every day, yet they work to help the families of other soldiers."

"We may be hundreds of miles away, but the Maupins are with us every day, in our hearts."

E-mail hwilkinson@enquirer.com ©Cincinatti Enquirer

POW-MIA Continued on Page 14

Vietnam Vets M/C USA WI Inc.
E-Mail: WIVNVMC@AOL.Com

22nd ANNUAL SUMMER TWISTER
July 27 - 28 - 29 - 30, 2006
Wildlife Refuge Campground, Birnamwood

Wildlife46@Juno.Com - Email
www.wildlifecampgrounds.com - Website
PHONE 715-449-3617

\$10,000 IN CASH DRAWINGS, ADVANCE TICKETS ONLY!!!
9 Great Bands - More than 30 Vendors
Free Beer, Soda, Food, Bonfire - POWMIA Ceremony Saturday at Noon
Fireworks Show by Fivestar Fireworks Co. Saturday evening
Ride in Bike Show - Bike Games Saturday
Adult Entertainment Saturday Night
FREE MC Camping beginning at NOON Thursday
Advance Tickets: \$50.00 donation - \$60.00 Donation at the Gate
Persons with Current Military ID - \$25.00
FOR INFO CALL: 1-725-873-3408 OR 1-920-452-4804

-- TWISTER BAND SCHEDULE --

Thursday, July 27th
"Road Kill" - "South Bound"

Friday, July 28th
"Little Cisco" - "The Crashers" - "Uncle Whiskey Breath"

Saturday, July 29th
POW / MIA CEREMONY AT MEMORIAL - NOON
"Sly Billy" - Dave Sky & Cold Water Creek" - "Spin"
"Michael Murphy & the M.O.B."