

## **MICHIGAN'S ONLY FEMALE IRAQ WAR CASUALTY | A DAUGHTER'S DEATH IN IRAQ STILL HAUNTS FAMILY**

*HOLLY MCGEOGH OF TAYLOR KNEW AT 15 SHE WANTED TO BE A SOLDIER. AT 17, HER MOM AGREED. AT 19, SHE DIED.*

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**On a cold Saturday**, 15 minutes after Paula Zasadny returned home from work, she heard a few faint taps, like bird pecks.

At her front door stood a solemn man wearing a green Army uniform, grasping a boat-shaped hat in his hands.

She would not let him in.

She would just let him stand there, behind the screen door of her Taylor home.

She peered into his patient, clean-shaven face and gazed into his sad, sad eyes, and she knew, even before he uttered the word "Ma'am."

Something had happened to her daughter.

Something had happened to 19-year-old Spec. Holly McGeogh, the ineffable teen who felt as special in an ivory prom gown as she did in dirty combat fatigues, who skipped classes one school year but made the honor roll the next, who adored Mountain Dew as much as the scent of plumeria.

That something - a bomb that exploded under a Humvee - would make Holly the first and so far only female soldier from Michigan to die in the current conflict in Iraq. The Improvised Explosive Device, or IED, that killed Holly and two other soldiers set off tides of sadness throughout Holly's hometown of Taylor and brought a swarm of attention to her family.

In the two years and four months since Holly's death, public focus has waned as thousands of other U.S. soldiers have died. But Paula and a network of relatives and friends cannot forget. For them, each day without a certain servicewoman means frequent tears, daily antidepressants, periodic cemetery visits and so many memories.

On Memorial Day, the holiday many welcome as the beginning of barbecues and summer fun, Paula will speak at VFW Post No. 4126 in Mio. She will talk about how Memorial Day has changed.

For her, it is no longer just a paid vacation day. Now, she takes time to thank veterans and remember the fallen, especially her daughter.

"She may be the first female soldier from Michigan killed," Paula, 42, said of Holly. "But regardless of what they say, she's still my little Willy, she's still my baby."

A reality of the conflict in Iraq, now well past the three-year mark, is that female soldiers like Holly are exposed to more combat than ever. Gone is the "risk rule," which historically prevented women from serving in combat support units that would come under enemy fire.

The most recent totals from the U.S. Department of Defense as of the end of last month show female soldiers make up nearly 10% of the 234,866 U.S. troops currently deployed to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. At least 52 out of 2,466 military deaths in Iraq have been women, according to data from the DOD and the Associated Press.

Cheryl Fregolle, a psychotherapist for Advanced Counseling Services PC in Taylor, says the death of a female soldier causes an added shock.

"This is very, very new," said Fregolle, 44, of Dearborn, who counseled Holly before she enlisted. "When we think soldiers, we think men. There's something barbaric about war, and we see it as something that's brawny and tough and Holly was not those things. I mean, she was very courageous but she was also very tender and loving and not someone you expect to see driving around in a Humvee."

**On the kitchen counter** of the Zasadny house, two prescription bottles sit side by side, one for Paula and the other for Mike Zasadny, Paula's husband and the stepfather Holly called "Daddy." Those translucent tubes contain 10-milligram pills, antidepressants called Lexapro.

The daily doses are out of necessity.

Once, when Mike skipped a few days of pills, he found himself inexplicably crying on the phone to his wife. If Paula skips a day, sleep does not come and tears are constant.

But this is progress. No longer must Paula also rely on Xanax to ease her anxiety. No longer does Mike need bottle after bottle of Budweiser.

Mike, 40, a service manager at LaFontaine Honda in Dearborn, has found other things to soothe him.

Nearly every weekend, he takes his mutt, Angel, and drives to Mio, where the family has a one-bedroom cabin.

He goes there to be alone.

To think.

To listen to Holly's voice in his head.

Mike still simmers when he thinks of the hole in the highway left by the bomb that also killed Sgt. Eliu A. Miersandoval, 27, of San Clemente, Calif., and Cpl. Juan C. Cabralbanuelos, 25, of Emporia, Kan.

He simmers when he thinks of the mangled Humvee and of a device blowing off his daughter's right jaw, right shoulder and the upper part of her torso.

"It never really goes away," he said.

But he also believed in Holly's passion for being a light-wheel mechanic in the Army's 4th Forward Support Battalion of the 4th Infantry Division. He smiles at the thought of her trying to sneak onto infantry raids.

"I always told Holly, if that's what she wanted to do, I would back her up 100%," Mike said. "It still bothers me."

**Paula, a quality manager for Schuler**, a metalworking systems supplier in Canton, finds refuge in her basement, which she has turned into a mini-Kinko's.

In it are racks filled with scissors and stamps and 48 colors of paper.

She started scrapbooking three years ago, as soon as Holly left for Iraq, and intended to give her daughter an album of memories - prom, high school graduation, boot camp, her first letter from the war.

Paula never had that chance.

The summer after her daughter died, Paula took the scrapbook to Holly anyway, to Our Lady of Hope Cemetery.

She stands in that grassy spot in Southgate on a windy Saturday afternoon, hovering above a gray granite stone etched with Holly's high school senior picture. Sandblasted near the bottom are the words "Our Brave Little Soldier."

Paula takes a 20-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew, Holly's favorite drink, and pours it on her daughter's grave.

She lights a Newport 100 cigarette and lets it burn on the damp grass. She lays down a bouquet of yellow roses, also Holly's favorite. And she leaves a tan stuffed rabbit and a small white stone that simply says "Miss You."

"Right now, I feel like this isn't fair," said Paula, gazing out on the tombstones. "This cemetery, she shouldn't be here. I also think about how proud I am of her."

**Rob McGeogh, 19**, has had since Jan. 31, 2004, to get used to feeling like an only child, to get used to his parents worrying that he doesn't cry enough, to get used to their lavish gifts.

He remembers once when his parents bought him a 2004 Honda CR125 dirt bike.

"It was cool," he said. "But I'd rather have my sister than a dirt bike."

Holly's last gift to him, a car stereo, prompted Rob to tell her "I love you" for the only time he can remember.

Usually a big prankster, Rob admits he still tears up at times in his truck, especially when he looks at dog tags bearing Holly's photo.

He tries to articulate that he always imagined women in wars as nurses and not as soldiers but then says no one should have stopped Holly from serving because that's what she most wanted to do.

"I wish I could have taken her place," he said. "I'm a boy, and my mom and my sister had a closer relationship. ... It was my sister. She shouldn't have been over there."

**The last 849 days** have not meant a solid stretch of grief. Holly would not have endorsed that kind of sadness.

Her official army picture comes across as serious, her lip a firm line. But it's the snapshots of Holly in Iraq and as a Taylor teen that testify to her fun-loving personality.

There's Holly, road-tripping with her best girlfriends. There's Holly reveling in a new 2003 Honda Civic in blue, her favorite color, which she would drive for just six weeks before being deployed to Iraq.

There's Holly sticking her tongue out at an image of Saddam Hussein. "She was a rebel, and she was never afraid of anything except for disappointing her parents," said Amy Aune, 21, one of Holly's closest friends who now lives in Honolulu. "She had no problem telling anybody anything. Ever."

In Iraq, Holly talked about her mother so much the soldiers who eulogized her called Paula her best friend. That closeness didn't come, however, until Paula caught her 15-year-old daughter smoking pot.

That's when a fuming Paula and an indignant Holly sat themselves on psychotherapist Cheryl Fregolle's tan loveseat every other Thursday.

"Holly wanted to do what she wanted to do and didn't like being told no," said Fregolle. "She was a 15-year-old kid, and she acted like one."

Throughout counseling, the three women visited the consequences of smoking marijuana and explored Holly's conflicting feelings toward her biological father, whom she had seen only occasionally since he and Paula divorced when Holly was 10.

The sessions ended after almost two years with a clean Holly and a more open Paula, both screaming lyrics to Eminem's "The Real Slim Shady" on their way to Fregolle's office and feeling closer than ever.

"I'm almost sorry I fixed her because if I didn't, maybe she wouldn't be dead," Fregolle recalls telling Pat Kovacs, Holly's maternal grandmother.

"But Pat said to me, 'It's important, it's what she wanted to do. She knew the risks. What you did was right and good. You gave Holly and Paula a relationship that they treasure.' "

**The part of Paula that Holly** inherited, the humorous, luminous part, emerges most brightly when Mom spends time with two of her best friends - Sue Nicholas, 50, of Taylor, and Kimberly Sessoms, 39, of Hazel Park - whom she met through the Michigan Military Moms.

They cry with each other, travel together, reminisce often and cover all the cliches that have been said about best friends.

Together, they unleash deep, prolonged, tear-inducing laughs as they talk about a time Sue got her head stuck in a nightstand. They giggle as they recall one of Kimberly's gifts to Paula - a yellow size 40DD bra - last August, the month Holly would have turned 21.

Around her neck, Paula wears dog tags bearing pictures of Sue and Kimberly's sons, who also served in Iraq. When the young men see Paula during military leave, they call her "Mom." The three talk about Holly, even though Sue and Kimberly never met her.

"She would've been the daughter you would have never had," Paula told them, just before dropping them off on a recent Thursday.

Said Kimberly: "She was."

**Standing in the cemetery**, Paula's mind drifts back to the time when Holly, at 15, told her she wanted to join the Army and then, two years later, after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, when she asked again, and a terrified Paula replied, "No way in hell. Absolutely not."

Still, Holly persisted, and her mom agreed, but not until April 2002. At age 17, Holly was so young when she enlisted Paula had to give her consent.

"After she died, I thought, 'Oh, my God, how could I let her go?' " Paula said. "But when I thought about it, I realized she would have gone anyway when she turned 18. It was meant to be."

Paula glances at the small American flag at the head of Holly's gravestone and kneels down. She kisses her fingers, rubs them against the etching of her daughter's face and whispers, "Bye, baby."

**Since Holly's death**, Paula has had one dream of her daughter.

In it, Holly sits cross-legged on her queen-sized bed. Her body is whole. She is smiling.

Paula walks toward Holly, holding out her hands. She twirls her daughter's raspberry brown locks.

She cradles Holly's cheeks.

Holly looks into her mother's eyes, and says what she has said in so many e-mails, in so many phone calls, and now, in this moment, in her Taylor home.

"Mom, I'm OK," she says. "Mom, I love you. I miss you.

"I'm OK. I'm going to be OK."

It's just a mother and a daughter. Holding each other.

And then, someone interrupts. It's Mike, his worried voice saying, "Honey, wake up!"

And Paula is back in her own bed, crying.

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(SIDEBAR)

## FEMALE SOLDIERS THROUGH HISTORY

1775-1783,

American Revolution: Women serve on the battlefield as nurses, cooks, water bearers and laundresses.

1846-1848,

Mexican War: Elizabeth Newcom enlists in the Missouri Volunteer Infantry as Bill Newcom and marches 600 miles to Colorado before her identity is discovered and she is discharged.

1861-1865,

Civil War: Women are nurses for both the Union and Confederacy. Dr. Mary Walker receives the Medal of Honor.

1898, Spanish-American War:

During the war, 1,500 civilian contract nurses are assigned to U.S. Army hospitals.

1917-1918, World War I:

During the war, 21,480 Army nurses serve in military hospitals. Others are bilingual telephone operators, yeomen and clerks.

1941-1945, World War II:

More than 150,000 women serve in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. The Women Airforce Service Pilots fly stateside missions as test pilots and antiaircraft artillery trainers. Women's reserve divisions are set up by the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

1948, Women's Armed Services Integration Act:

Signed by President Harry S. Truman, this granted women permanent, professional status in the military.

1967:

A 2% cap on the number of women serving in the military is repealed as is a ceiling on what grade a woman can achieve.

1965-1975, Vietnam War:

Eight women in the military die, some in plane and helicopter crashes and others from illness and shrapnel wounds.

1990-1991, Persian Gulf War:

About 40,000 U.S. military women deploy during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

1994:

The Department of Defense rescinds the "risk rule," which barred women from serving in combat support units that could come under enemy fire. 2003-present, war in Iraq and current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan: 22,744 female soldiers are deployed.

SOURCES: Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, U.S. Coast Guard, "The Women's Army Corps: A Commemoration of World War II Service" by Judith A. Bellefaire, and data from the Department of Defense

(SIDEBAR)

#### HOW TO PAY TRIBUTE TO SPEC. HOLLY MCGEOGH

\* Visit an exhibit featuring McGeogh's uniform and other paraphernalia from Iraq at Michigan's Own Military & Space Museum. The museum, at 1250 Weiss St. in Frankenmuth, is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. every day. 989-652-8005; [www.michigansmilitarymuseum.com.cq](http://www.michigansmilitarymuseum.com.cq)

\* Honor McGeogh on the day she died during an annual candlelight vigil at 7 p.m. Jan. 31 at Harry S. Truman High School in Taylor, where she graduated in 2002. For information, call Nancy Lynch at 313-468-6080 any evening, 6-9 p.m., or e-mail her at [heavenlykisses628@yahoo.com](mailto:heavenlykisses628@yahoo.com).

\* Contribute to a scholarship in McGeogh's honor. Sponsored by the Taylor Fraternal Order of Police, the Holly McGeogh Memorial Scholarship is given each year to a graduate from Truman High School as well as a student from Kennedy High School, also in Taylor. To donate, send checks payable to Taylor Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 123, 23515 Goddard Road, Taylor 48180, to the attention of Mary Sciabassi. Put "Holly McGeogh Scholarship" in the memo line.

\* The Oakland County Veterans Group and Lest They Be Forgotten are raising money for a memorial. Mail checks payable to OCVG/LTBF to OCVG/LTBF, 711 Reynolds Drive, Waterford 48328. Write "Holly McGeogh Memorial" on the memo line. You can also donate at [www.michigansoldiers.com](http://www.michigansoldiers.com).

-- Erin Chan

ILLUSTRATION: Photo courtesy of Paula Zasadny; Photo MADALYN RUGGIERO Special to the Free Press; Photo Prestige Portraits by Lifetouch

CAPTION: Holly McGeogh graduated from Harry S. Truman High School in 2002.

MADALYN RUGGIERO/Special to the Free Press

Paula Zasadny, 42, of Taylor looks over mementos in a room she created in memory of her daughter, Army Spec. Holly McGeogh, who was killed Jan. 31, 2004, in Iraq when her Humvee hit a roadside bomb. "It's my favorite room," Zasadny says. "We said our good-byes and I did not want to let go."

Photos courtesy of Paula Zasadny



The Humvee dubbed Aggressor No. 17 lay in pieces on the road to Kirkuk, Iraq, after it was destroyed by a bomb, killing driver Spec. Holly McGeogh, 19, of Taylor and two other soldiers. McGeogh is the first female soldier from Michigan to die in the Iraq war.

Spec. McGeogh poses for a snapshot in Iraq. "I wish I could have taken her place," her brother Rob McGeogh said of military service.

CAPTIONWRITER: Prestige Portraits by Lifetouch

MEMO: MEMORIAL DAY 2006;SIDEBAR ATTACHED

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

Holly McGeogh, the ineffable teen who felt as special in an ivory prom gown as she did in dirty combat fatigues, who skipped classes one school year but made the honor roll the next, who adored Mountain Dew as much as the scent of plumeria. The most recent totals from the U.S. Department of Defense as of the end of last month show female soldiers make up nearly 10% of the 234,866 U.S. troops currently deployed to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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