

‘This Good, Black Earth’

Memorial Day opens wounds old and new

BY ROBERT L. KAISER | CHICAGO | 05.26.03

The unlucky ones came back like this, in a gleaming hearse, to a weeping mother, toward a place beneath an old oak tree.

It was 3 a.m. when the grim little procession carrying Army Cpl. Greg Sanders home one last time rode into Hobart, Ind., on April 7, turned onto California Street and stopped in front of his mother's house.

Leslie Sanders stood on the front porch weeping quietly, seeing her son's coffin in the idling black hearse but taking not one step toward it, the sleeping town quiet and her alone in her sorrow save for a few sobbing family members standing in the front yard.

This holiday weekend, which brings a Memorial Day emotionally rawer than most because it falls so soon after war, Sanders will have plenty of company as all of America stands with her in honoring her son, killed by a sniper's bullet in Iraq.

But the public pageantry of the holiday, an annual rite that usually is the province of the long dead rather than those whose graves are too new to bear grass or headstones, will do little to ease the lonesome, private ache of those who lost someone recently.

"He's a hero to everybody else, but he's still my child," Sanders said.

Jim Frazier, whose son Staff Sgt. Jacob L. Frazier of St.

Charles, was killed in Afghanistan in March, said: "There's that never-ness. You never get to see them again, you never get to touch them, you never get to hug them.

"Time only blunts the pain."

Like most families that lost a loved one in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Fraziers were busy this weekend with public obligations.

They were in Chicago on Saturday for the parade and laying of the wreaths.

Then, on Monday, they'll be at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood for the annual Memorial Day service.

Jacob Frazier, laid to rest in Lincoln's Section 1, is the only veteran out of more than 6,000 buried at the 3 1/2-year-old cemetery who was killed in action--though some memorials honor World War II soldiers who were killed in the line of duty but whose bodies never were recovered.

But this Memorial Day will hold little extra grief compared with some other holidays to come, Jim Frazier said last week.

"This is Memorial Day," he said. "Our son is included with tens of thousands who have lost their lives over a long period of time. In the next couple of days, and these are not very appropriate words, but they are all lumped together. You can separate [yourself] from that. But you can't separate his birthday, you can't separate Christmas morning, you can't separate Thanksgiving.

"Those are personal to us."

For the family of Marine Cpl. Evan T. James of La Harpe, Ill., Memorial Day happens to nearly coincide with a day of uniquely personal significance: The 20-year-old James, who drowned in a canal March 24 in Iraq, would have turned 21 May 30.

His mother, Donna James, said the family declined an invitation to ride in Chicago's Memorial Day parade, because they had other, unrelated obligations and because they need time alone together.

"We'd been exposed enough," James said. "It was time to cut it off and move along."

On Monday morning the James family will attend a local service at the park in La Harpe, where the American Legion women have erected a memory wall for the veterans.

But mostly the family will mark the occasion privately, in their own way and on their own time. Donna James has ordered flowers to take to her son's grave, including yellow roses--his favorite.

"Reality has sunk in, I think," she said. "I think it finally has pretty much sunk in that he's not coming home."

Thursday night the family took what seemed like the first step toward normalcy since Evan's death: His two brothers, 19-year-old Grant and 23-year-old Craig sat down at the dinner table with their sister, 25-year-old Nicole; Nicole's 21-month-old daughter, Hailey; and Craig's wife and Nicole's husband.

And, for the first time since Evan died, they ate the boys' favorite dish: a cured ham roast with sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes and gravy.

Until last week--by coincidence, just four days before Memorial Day--Donna had not found it in herself to cook that old, iconic family meal.

"It's a return to normalcy--finally," she said, as she cleared away the dinner dishes.

Still, the Memorial Day weekend, though busy with the college graduations of nephews, will not be easy--arriving as it does along with Evan's birthday, she said. The family did not attend last year's Memorial Day service in the La Harpe local park.

"It's just a small service, but we know they'll be talking about Evan, so it'll be a struggle," Donna James said.

"It's just been hard to accept, in such a quick war, knowing that his unit's probably headed back home already. You just think he's going to walk back in the door and say 'Hi', just like

his letter said: 'We'll be back in July.'"

But Evan James, a Marine engineer, came home early, to a grave in the La Harpe cemetery adorned with mysterious yellow roses left one at a time by a regular but unknown visitor.

Since then Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville has awarded James an honorary degree. He was a sophomore there, studying health and fitness on Uncle Sam's dime; James joined the service to pay for college, his mother said.

Greg Sanders, 19, who shipped out to Kuwait Jan. 23, also came home early.

Sanders, a patriotic young man who had dreamed of joining the military since he was a boy, had told his mother at a young age: Mom I think I'm reincarnated. I think I was killed in Vietnam.

The pictures he drew always were of soldiers, battleships and tanks.

In high school the slightly built Sanders was co-captain of the cross-country team. He enlisted and spent his senior year in the delayed-entry program but offered to stay home after his father died.

"I said, 'No, you're going to live your dream,'" Leslie Sanders recalled.

In 2001, Sanders graduated, went to boot camp and married his high school sweetheart.

Then he shipped out.

"That's every parent's hope, that their child lives their dream and doesn't get stuck in the doldrums of ordinary life. He lived his dream--even though it was short."

Something about her son's homecoming was a relief for Sanders. It had been two weeks--"a long two weeks," she said--since he died of a sniper's bullet and the man in Army dress-greens had come knocking at her door.

Sanders had been through this before, had opened the front door to men in uniform bearing bad news. Her husband, Richard Sanders, an industrial painter who previously had been a boiler technician for 10 years in the Navy, died three years ago of a heart attack while on a job painting bridges in southern Indiana. He was 37.

The state troopers who came calling told her he died at dinnertime, right after finishing work for the day.

When Leslie Sanders received word three years later that her son had died, she knew what she had to do: move her husband's body to the veterans' section of the cemetery so father and child could be buried together.

Now they are side by side in the shade of an old oak tree.

The weekend was a busy one for Leslie Sanders. Friday she went to a Memorial Day service in Indianapolis in honor of Indiana's war casualties. Saturday was the parade and wreath-laying ceremony in Chicago. Sunday was the Memorial Day service at the cemetery.

"I remember as a kid going with my grandmother to the Memorial Day service," said Sanders, a Hobart native.

Many relatives are buried in the cemetery.

"On Sunday we'll go and have a picnic and clean the headstones and take flowers and kind of talk," she said last week. "This year it's going to be ... it's going to be rough. It's my son. It's so different. A parent's love -- a piece of me died the day he died, and I'll never be the same.

"When they're alive, you look at your kids and think, 'That's a memory right there, that's a memory.' And I want to soak this in. Years down the road, it'll be me and my family and a handful of close friends that will remember Greg by name. People remember the heroes, but they don't remember the names.

"So I want to just soak in everything I can."

Sanders, like others for whom the wound remains too fresh, also will seek a little quiet time alone this weekend.

"I am looking forward to that private time, to reflect, to cry and laugh," she said.

Donna James might spend some time in her flower garden.

"It's been a challenge," she said.

"I have a hard time keeping this good, black earth soft."