

In 'Elah,' war's casualties are found beyond the battlefields

by Norma Meyer

Their only son's skeletal remains were housed in a cardboard box and tagged as prosecution evidence for more than three years. Finally this spring, in a cemetery in California's high desert, Vietnam vet Lanny Davis and his retired Army medic wife, Remy, laid to rest the bone fragments etched with stab marks from a knife.

PAUL HAGGIS - Paul Haggis wrote and directed 'In the Valley of Elah,' based in part on the story of slain Army Spc. Richard Davis. CNS Photo by Alex Gibson. "This ain't my America. My son tried doing the same thing his daddy did. He made me proud," says a still grief-stricken Davis from his home in St. Charles, Mo. His voice is raspy, a permanent condition caused when a Viet Cong soldier jammed a rifle butt into his throat and damaged his vocal cords.

Army Spc. Richard Davis, 25, had been at the forefront of the bloody invasion of Iraq, but he didn't die in one of those fierce battles. A day after returning to Fort Benning, Ga., from their tour of duty, he and four platoon members celebrated by drinking at a Hooters and a topless bar.

The men he had fought alongside in Iraq would later be convicted on charges stemming from the stabbing of Richard at least 33 times that night and their driving to a convenience store to buy lighter fluid that they poured on his body and torched.

While Richard's corpse decomposed in the Georgia woods for nearly four months, the Army declared him AWOL. His body was found after a tipster's call to police.

Lanny Davis believes Fort Benning should have investigated his son's disappearance immediately. The Army counters that it was acting according to procedure and that a soldier is listed as AWOL for 48 hours. After 10 days, his family is notified.

"In the Valley of Elah," which is based on Richard Davis' slaying, is one of Hollywood's first feature films to explore the devastating psychological toll of America's latest war. Oscar-winning writer-director Paul Haggis ("Crash") suggests in the movie that Richard's brothers-in-arms - like tens of thousands of returning vets - suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder from the battlefield.

Lanny Davis, who is called Hank Deerfield in the film and played by Tommy Lee Jones, has a slightly different take of what happened that horrible night in July 2003. He believes the assailants plotted to kill his son because, according to a 2004 article in Playboy magazine, Richard had witnessed atrocities in Iraq, including the alleged rape of an Iraqi girl by two of the men.

"The movie is going to make a lot of people think about this illegal war, and that's the big thing," says Davis, 58. He commends the film for bringing attention to the rising number of vets who, like he does, suffer from PTSD.

"I've got it from Vietnam," Davis says, adding he wakes up screaming and suffers extreme anxiety. "And it's gotten worse, since that was my only son." Davis' other child, a 24-year-old daughter, has Down syndrome, which he attributes to his exposure to Agent Orange.

BACK STORY

Director/screenwriter Haggis wove into the plot of "In the Valley of Elah" an unrelated true story about an Iraq vet who followed his training not to stop his armored vehicle for civilians in the road because it could be an ambush. The soldier remained haunted from running over an Iraqi boy.

"This is not about whether the war was right or wrong, but our vets' needs," longtime peace activist Susan Sarandon, who plays the slain soldier's mother in "Elah," said recently. Like Haggis, she cites various U.S. government reports indicating not enough is being done to identify and treat vets with PTSD, a psychiatric disorder that can result in depression, nightmares, flashbacks and violent behavior.

"Our guys are over there trying to stay alive," says Sarandon. "And if you're fighting a war that's a civilian population, you're having to kill civilians. You don't know who you're killing. You don't have time to find out. What the movie does is acknowledge that war is a defining moment in somebody's life and that it changes you, and that you need help when you come back to a population that is completely ignorant of what you've been through."

A Department of Defense spokeswoman declined to answer e-mail or phone requests for statistics or information about what the military is doing regarding PTSD. During one call, the spokeswoman bristled, "Oh, so Susan Sarandon and the producer of some movie are now military experts?"

A Pentagon task force, however, recently reported that 49 percent of National Guard members, 38 percent of soldiers and 31 percent of Marines who served in Iraq or Afghanistan have experienced mental health problems, including PTSD.

Lanny Davis refers to Army higher-ups as "bastards" and "crooks." But he still says, "Yes ma'am" as if he's in the service. He describes himself as "an old country boy who grew up believing in this country and the Old Testament."

Son Richard enlisted at 18 and was soon deployed to Bosnia, where he witnessed the unearthing of mass graves from ethnic massacres. "He said to me, 'Dad, how could people do that to other people?' I knew he wasn't the same son I had before. I could see in his face all the hurt and anguish," Davis says.

The father's hoarse voice cracks when he remembers the last conversation he had with his son, who at the time was still in Iraq. An upset Richard talked about his armored vehicle being hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and complained about the lack of supplies.

"He said he didn't have any boot strings and he had to take them off a dead Iraqi, and even those broke," Davis recalls. "He was begging me, 'Dad, can't you get me out of here?'"

According to the Georgia prosecutor's theory, Richard's slaying was no more than a bar fight gone terribly bad. Pvt. Jacob Burgoyne told authorities he scuffled with Davis in the parking lot of the topless bar, which the soldiers had been kicked out of reportedly after Davis had insulted one of the dancers. The five men drove off before pulling over on a dark road. At some point, Pfc. Alberto Martinez flew into a rage and began repeatedly stabbing Richard.

Martinez and Pfc. Mario Navarette were later convicted of murder and sentenced to life. Burgoyne pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter and got 20 years. Pfc. Douglas Woodcoff received five years probation after pleading guilty to concealing a death.

There may have been at least one forewarning of the tragedy. A week before Richard's killing, Burgoyne had tried to overdose on anti-depressants in Kuwait. He was diagnosed with PTSD at a military hospital and described as having "homicidal/suicidal" thoughts. Then he was allowed to ship off with his unit to Fort Benning.

MOVIE METAPHOR

The title of Haggis' movie is a metaphor for the Iraq war. Elah is the biblical valley where David, the Israelite youth, miraculously struck down the giant Goliath with a stone and a slingshot.

"What kind of king would send a boy out to fight this guy, knowing he didn't have a chance?" the director asks.

Lanny and Remy Davis visited the movie set and stay in touch with Haggis. But they have also commissioned a writer, Cilla McCain, to tell more of their story in an upcoming book, titled "Murder in Baker Company."

The parents, who also established a Richard T. Davis Peace Foundation in his memory, endured two funerals for their grown boy. In December 2003, a piece of Richard's remains was interred with full military honors in an Apple Valley cemetery in San Bernardino County. After Georgia prosecutors released the rest of the remains in April, the family buried what was left of Richard in the same plot.

Since the murder, it's difficult for Remy to be in their Missouri home. She spends a lot of time with her relatives in Apple Valley, near Richard's grave. Lanny says he finds comfort in St. Charles, where Richard's souped-up electric-blue 1999 Honda Civic remains in the garage.

"He said, 'Dad, when I get back, we'll get that new engine in.'"

Lanny had gone ahead and installed the motor as a homecoming surprise his only son never saw.

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