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Mother recalls tragic period: Anniversary of son's death in Beirut near

By Cathianne Werner-Porterfield, Milford Chronicle

MILFORD - When summer temperatures and warm breezes give way to crisp fall days, it takes Joan Muffler back to a week in October 1983 and a horrible event she and the parents and loved ones of 241 American servicemen wished had never happened.

"The change in the weather kind of reminds me what took place," Mrs. Muffler said. "It does get easier as the years go on. It does get a little bit easier but it never goes away."

It was 23 years ago on Oct. 23 when a suicide bomber driving a yellow Mercedes-Benz delivery truck loaded with the equivalent of 12,000 pounds of explosives drove into U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters at Beirut International Airport killing 220 Marines, 18 sailors and three Army soldiers.

Because the servicemen were on a "peace-keeping" mission, they were unable to fire upon the truck or its driver, whom one Marine survivor said was "smiling" as he crashed into the lobby of the four-story cinderblock building.

"These Marines were not allowed to have bullets in their guns," Mrs. Muffler said. "They had to ask if they could shoot back. These were the rules of engagement at the time."

The Sunday morning bombing was almost immediately televised and the Mufflers, who were residents of Bucks County, Pa., at the time, learned of the tragedy as they watched the morning news, a ritual in their household.

"We heard there was an explosion and a lot of casualties," she said.

The news program offered a phone number that families could call.

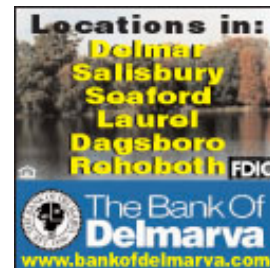
"The first thing I did was call my oldest son in the Army," she said.

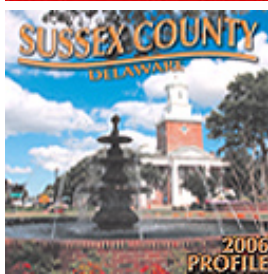
She told him she thought her son "Johnny's building had been blown up."

But her oldest son said he believed his younger brother was "in the field" and therefore safe.

"That settled me down for a few hours," she said.

And then she started making phone calls again.





"This went on from Sunday to Thursday," she said.

On Thursday, one of her son's friends called and said they thought they had seen Johnny's face during a broadcast of Marines cleaning up the site of the bombing.

So Mrs. Muffler went to the television station in Philadelphia and reviewed the tape.

It was not her son.

"Marines look alike," she said. "I thought it looked like him, but I didn't think it was him."

That's when she was told by a neighbor that a group of Marines were outside her front door.

"I was home within a couple of hours and they all came back," she said. "They had to report that he was missing and assumed he was in the building, but they weren't sure."

But by 7:30 a.m. Saturday, they were sure.

"They told us he had been identified," she said.

Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Johnny Muffler, 19, was dead.

Within two weeks, her son's body was on its way to Dover and he was buried in the veterans' section of a community cemetery in Bucks County, Pa.

These scenes replay in her mind.

"They could not have treated us better," she said. "The cemetery offered the ground and there was such a big turnout. When the procession went by, as we went through each township, the police would pick it up."

A relative shared with Mrs. Muffler something they overheard that day.

"Somebody very important must have died," she said.

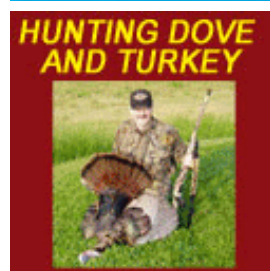
And he was important, as were the other Marines and the terrible emotions suffered by all their parents.

So Mrs. Muffler sat down and wrote a letter to "Dear Abby."

"She called me up and I asked for her help to try and get the families together," she said. "She put it in the papers and then we started getting all these letters from the families who also wanted to contact each other."

The parents quickly organized and took up a cause to preserve the memory of their sons through such projects as memorials and a postage stamp.

And although memorials are scattered across the country, they were never able to have a memorial stamp produced, something that frustrates Mrs. Muffler to this



day.

Although the parents were incredibly active in this effort and carried petitions to Washington where they met with the postmaster general, their request was never honored.

"We took boxes of petitions to Washington and they said, 'no more petitions,'" she said.

She still has the letter from Postmaster General Marvin Runyon indicating why they would not issue a stamp based on a policy to not commemorate tragedies or disasters.

It left her confused as she researched the existence of Civil War, Vietnam War and other stamps recognizing conflicts.

The group discussed changes to the stamps and called senators, representatives and presidents over the years.

"They all want to help, but nothing ever comes of it," she said.

But the families do not forget, and each year they gather at reunions in Camp Lejeune, N.C. and Arlington National Cemetery and services are held on bases in many parts of the country.

A veterans group has now stepped forward and taken up the stamp cause.

They have a Web site at www.beirut-memorial.org.

"I thought I'd step back," she said. "They have been doing a great job and they have a petition."

And while she continues to mourn her son and think of the parents who lost their sons on that day, a new threat to servicemen and women is also on her mind now.

"I just know that I'm doing better as the years go on," she said. "But every time I hear what's going on in Iraq, the parents come to my mind and I really get an ache in my heart for them going through what the Beirut parents went through."

And when she picked up her newspaper and saw a photo of 19-year-old Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Richard Chad Clifton, of Milford, she couldn't help but pick up the phone and call his mother, Terry Clifton.

Also, a Marine, slightly built and 19 years old, she might as well have been reading about her son.

"The only thing that held me together was that (being a Marine) was my son's desire," she said. "We talk and I know exactly what she's going through."

She said she hopes the stamp honoring these Beirut Marines could soon become a reality as the 25th anniversary of the bombing approaches.

"I just hope they always remember our peacekeepers," she said.

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