

Quilters' Busy Hands Can't Quite Keep Up With Deaths in Iraq

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Jan Lang and Military Moms
Sew for Bereaved Families,
Many Hard to Track Down

By MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS

VALLEY PARK, Mo. — The war in Iraq is racing ahead of Jan Lang's good intentions.

In 2003, around the time President Bush declared major combat operations to be over, Mrs. Lang and a group of military mothers pledged to provide a handmade, personalized quilt for the next of kin of every U.S. serviceman and woman killed in Iraq. It seemed like a manageable task when the death toll stood around 250.

But as of yesterday, with 1,874 names on the rolls of the dead, Mrs. Lang and the Marine Comfort Quilt volunteer group are struggling to keep their promise. "Never did I think that, two-and-a-half years later, I'd still be doing this,"

says Mrs. Lang, the group's founder, who sometimes finds herself in a panic at the thought she might have sent the wrong quilt to a grieving family.

The group has finished 1,313 quilts but faces a backlog of more than 550. Complicating their project, the volunteers have been unable to identify and locate the next of kin for at least 282 of the dead. The volunteers have assigned a few of their own—including a retired home-economics teacher and a records-retrieval professional who normally works for bill collectors—to act as detectives, hunting down the missing families.

The volunteers sometimes find themselves entangled in family disputes and have to decide who is the most deserving next of kin. Is it the woman whom the young Marine dated briefly and then married before heading off to war? Or is it the parents who raised him? What if the parents are divorced? Choose wrong or choose right and Mrs. Lang can end up getting an angry letter from a bereaved relative.

Mrs. Lang hit upon the idea in March 2003, when two Marine officers in dress

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Jan Lang

Deaths in Iraq Keep Quilters Busy

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blue uniforms appeared on her doorstep in suburban Valley Park to inform the Langs that their son Alex, a corporal, was missing in action. "I just know he's dead," Mrs. Lang remembers telling a friend.

Mrs. Lang learned 24 hours later that Cpl. Lang had been found unhurt. But her joy quickly turned to guilt when she heard that 18 of her son's comrades had died in the battle for an Nasiriyah. Why had her son survived when other families had lost theirs?

Inspired by another military quilter, the 47-year-old Mrs. Lang vowed to make a bedcover for each of the families of the dead from her son's unit. It took her two months to complete them all, using squares sent by other volunteers. Soon her pledge became a promise to make a quilt for all fallen Marines, who then numbered fewer than 80. In August 2003, when the total U.S. death toll was 258, she and the other mothers in a loose network that now includes about 150 reliable volunteers decided to cover all of the services. Mrs. Lang figured that with the fighting over, the casualty list wouldn't grow much.

Volunteers shipped her 12.5-inch by 12.5-inch squares in fabrics from calico to camouflage, with gold stars and American flags, white doves and green tanks, hand-stitched roses and hand-written condolences. "May you find comfort and peace," wrote one Marine mom in Morrisville, Pa. "Angels do find us in our hour of need." The center squares, made by a mother in Dallas, are personalized in memory of each casualty.

Keeping the promise, however, has proved to be a monumental challenge as the list of the fallen has become longer. In a typical week this month, Mrs. Lang received seven finished quilts from volunteers, while 17 soldiers and Marines died in Iraq.

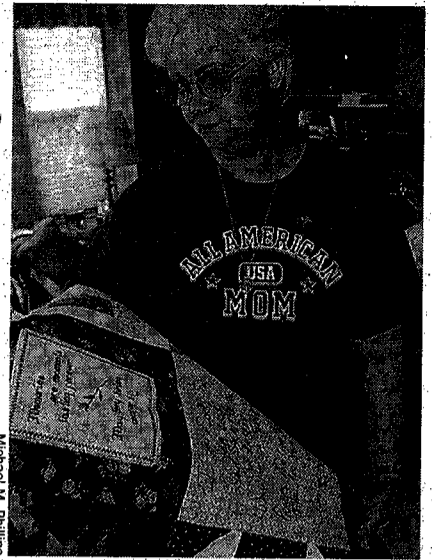
Mrs. Lang regularly wakes up at dawn to organize the quilt makers, rushes to her day job in client relations at Automatic Data Processing, Inc., and then quilts into the night. She is constantly hunting for more volunteers to provide squares or sew quilts. Her computer holds a bewildering array of spreadsheets color-coded to indicate the status of hundreds of quilts not yet started, in the works, completed or delivered. The purple rows indicate that the quilt is done but that Mrs. Lang doesn't know where to send it. As of yesterday, there were 108 purple rows.

Military families are often transient, moving from base to base as the service demands. But that mobility is accelerated by a soldier's death. A man's widow—most spouses of the dead are women—can remain in base housing for only so long before she has to return to the civilian world. As a certified charity, Marine Comfort Quilts gets from the Army the last known addresses of the deceased. For Marines, the quilters cull names from press releases, then send postcards to Corps headquarters, which, eventually, forwards them to the next of kin. By the time word gets back, the next of kin might be anywhere.

In her former guest room, Mrs. Lang has a stack of 36 quilts, personalized in memory of dead Marines whose families she can't find. Another volunteer has dozens of homeless Army quilts in her house in Illinois. In other cases, the quilters haven't even started stitching because they wouldn't know where to send their finished work.

That's where 60-year-old Patricia Messmer steps in. While other volunteers, including a Minnesota records-retrieval specialist, search the Internet for information, Mrs. Messmer is the one who makes the phone calls on behalf of the quilters, because of her soft Southern accent, grandmotherly demeanor and her master's degree in psychology. Her husband is a Vietnam veteran, and her daughter is a paratrooper. A natural sleuth, Mrs. Messmer has found 126 missing next of kin through more than 1,500 calls to churches, lawmakers, police stations, libraries and other likely sources of information all over the country. It has been a 40-hour-a-week effort since February.

Mrs. Messmer has grown adept at dealing with the grief-stricken next of kin, with whom she often ends up having



Patricia Messmer holds a comfort quilt.

long, emotional conversations. When she rings, she is always careful to speak in the present tense: "Are you the mother of Pvt. X?" or "Are you the wife of Capt. Y?" She learned quickly that putting a loved one in the past tense is too shocking.

In a red three-ring binder, Mrs. Messmer keeps a record of her successes. There is Army Sgt. Thomas Robbins of New York, about whom she has three pages of notes and scratched-out phone numbers. She made 31 calls in search of the sergeant's widow, ringing the local newspaper, the principal of his high school, three mortuaries, the governor's office and several people with the same last name. One unrelated Robbins, coincidentally, had a friend who lived across the street from the sergeant's grandmother. The grandmother led Mrs. Messmer to the mother, who led her to the widow.

In a white binder, she keeps files on 21 cases of families she hasn't yet been able to track down. There's Spc. Jaime Moreno of Illinois. She found the Red Lobster where he worked in the mid-1990s, but the new manager had never met him. Another elusive one is Spc. Justin B. Onwordi of Chandler, Ariz. One obituary said his brother owned a fitness center in Tempe, but the Chamber of Commerce and the local paper had no record of him. "God bless us one and all," Mrs. Messmer has doodled in the margins of her notebook during her frustrating search for one Army widow.

"I thought I could get them done in a month, but she keeps adding them," Mrs. Messmer, who lives in Benson, Mo., said during a visit to Mrs. Lang's house.

At times, the nonstop grief overwhelms Mrs. Lang, whose home is filled with porcelains of doe-eyed children and pets. She avoids looking at the photos she receives from grateful families. "To keep my emotions and not fall into a total depression about all this, I have to separate the face from the quilt," she says.

But she vows to keep quilting, inspired by those moments when a quilt reaches its intended recipient just when it's needed the most. Betsy Beard of Chapel Hill, N.C., got hers last month, on the day her son's unit returned to the U.S. without him. She was at home, reading aloud the list of names of the returning men in the vain hope that there had been some mistake and her son Brad would appear on it. The doorbell rang, and the FedEx man handed her a box with a quilt inside, inscribed in memory of her son. She spread it out on the floor, crawled over each square, and wrapped herself in it until she stopped weeping.

That day she wrote to Mrs. Lang: "This week has been one of the most painful of the whole nine months of our bereavement. Writing 'nine months' like that makes me think of the nine months I carried my son before he was born. Some days I thought it would never end, but of course it did, and he was born: a perfect, lovely, healthy baby boy. Now I have been carrying my grief for nine months, and there is no end in sight, no wonderful outcome to all this grindingly sorrowful labor. ...When the pain is so intense, so deep, and so unremitting, it is a comfort to know that other families care."