

Talk of war stirs memory of loss

Death in 1968 was pivotal moment in Parma, Ohio

By Rick Hampson
USA TODAY

PARMA, Ohio — It was Sunday evening. The boy was sitting on the couch, watching Disney, when he looked out the picture window. Two men in military uniforms were walking up the driveway.

Thirty-five years later, he can still hear his mother's scream.

The men were escorted to the kitchen, where they confirmed what the scream anticipated: His older brother, Marine Pfc. Gregory W. Fischer, was dead, the 13th Vietnam War fatality from this working-class suburb of Cleveland.

Few communities were more patriotic than Parma. Few communities, per capita, lost more sons in Vietnam. Greg Fischer's death would be a small turning point — "one of those moments when Middle America turned against the war," says Clark Dougan, who sat next to Fischer in high school homeroom.

"People just said, 'Enough is enough,'" Dougan recalls. "And when a place like Parma turned against the war, that was it."

Now, with the United States poised to go to war with Iraq, people here look and wait for another such moment of insight into what military power can and can't achieve.

But Fischer's family, friends and neighbors, who agree that the Vietnam War was a hideous mistake, share no such unanimity on a military campaign in Iraq. His mother backs the president all the way. His sister wants the United Nations involved, but his uncle and brother support a U.S. strike with or without U.N. support. Other relative thinks invading Iraq would poison relations with Muslim nations and increase the terrorist threat.

A man in Fischer's old neighborhood thinks George W. Bush just wants Iraq's oil, and a student at his old school says the United States is making itself look like a bully.



Family photo

Talk to 10 people and you get five reasons why the United States should invade Iraq and five reasons why it should not. You hear:

► That war would forestall more attacks like those of Sept. 11, 2001, and that it would provoke more of them.

► That war would incur high casualties in house-to-house fighting in Baghdad, and that it would be won as easily as the 1991 Gulf War.

► That war would bring democracy to Iraq, and that it would bring chaos to Iraq.

This ambivalence extends across a nation whose people mostly support an invasion to disarm Saddam Hussein but mostly oppose it without U.N. support. That sort of division reminds many people here of Vietnam.

An unknown soldier

On Memorial Day 1968, three months after those two Marines walked up the driveway, a story appeared atop Page One of *The Cleveland Press*: "Did You Know Him? This Boy of 19."

This boy was Greg Fischer. As described by Press reporter Dick Feagler, Fischer was a sort of unknown soldier: The kid who sold you a pack of smokes at York Leader Drug, or

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Did You Know Him? This Boy of 19

In an Memorial Day issue this year, *The Press* published the story of Marine Pfc. Gregory Fischer, 1968's youngest Marine to die in Vietnam.

That day in Parma, Ohio, he is described in all the young men who have gone to war with his parents and neighbors, and whose deaths have left holes in the hearts of the living.

By DICK FEAGLER

quoting the order that sent this boy to die there. For he was a boy. The legend on the gravestone reads:

OUR BELOVED SON
PFC. GREGORY W. FISCHER
FEB. 1 1949 FEB. 22 1968

Maybe you know him.

driving home a goal and looking pleased as if he had scored something to himself.

1968 you see the boy in the marine uniform at the Parma High football game last fall?

He is somebody's beloved son Gregory. He will be 19 years old forever.

PFC. GREGORY W. FISCHER. His mother called him Greg. His buddies called him Fish. The *Married Corps* called him a variety of things. But his name is Gregory.

The Cleveland Press



By Jason A. Cohn for USA TODAY

Marine Pfc. Greg Fischer's mother on attacking Iraq: "Saddam (Hussein) is treacherous. We gotta get rid of this jerk. Do we need another horrible thing to happen before we do something?" asks Dee Piastrelli, whose son was killed in South Vietnam in 1968.

flipped you a burger at the McDonald's on Pearl Road. The one you saw skating on the Forestwood Park rink after school or in his Marine uniform at the high school football game last fall.

"Did you know him without knowing?" Feagler asked. "See him without seeing?"

Fischer would have been easy to miss. He was a pleasant, quiet boy who did poorly in high school. Because he wasn't going to college, he knew he'd have to enlist in the military or be drafted. He volunteered for the Marines, he said, because they were the toughest.

Fischer's parents didn't share his enthusiasm. His uncle, an officer in the Air Force Reserves, tried to talk him out of it. Fischer himself apparently had second thoughts. "Why I joined the Marines I don't know," he once wrote. "I think I was trying to prove something to myself."

Fischer came home after basic training before shipping out to South Vietnam. He seemed nervous — always smoking, always polishing his shoes.

He left behind a sealed envelope to be opened if he didn't come back. The letter said part of his life insurance money should help send his brother to college and pay for his sister Debbie's wedding ("she will make some man very happy, and I want her to have a good start.")

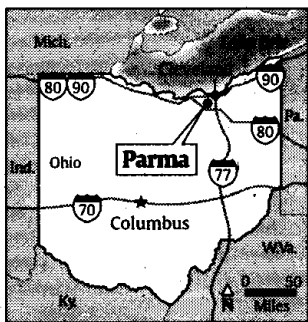
Fischer stopped in Okinawa, Japan, en route to South Vietnam and dropped his parents a note. "When my name was called, a funny feeling came over me. I think that was the first moment I really believed I was going to a war zone. My knees became weak and my body turned cold. I pictured myself as a real Marine. I look back on my life and I just wonder."

On Feb. 22, 1968, Fischer was



By Jason A. Cohn for USA TODAY

In Parma: Marilyn and Frank Golkowski are conflicted about attacking Iraq. "I myself don't want to, but you have to," she says.



By Frank Pompea, USA TODAY

shot in the head while on patrol in South Vietnam. It was a month after he had entered the country, and 17 days after his 19th birthday.

Voices, then and now

Feagler's profile of the dead soldier departed radically from the genre. No one said Pfc. Fischer died for a higher cause. No one called for victory to avenge his loss. It was the end of an era: A region that had provided the men and materials that won America's war would never again accept war uncritically or bear its losses stoically.

Here is what some of the family, friends, neighbors and successors of Greg Fischer have to say about the prospect of war with Iraq.

► **Dee Piastrelli**, Fischer's

mother, was widowed five years ago. Her son's Purple Heart hangs on her bedroom wall.

"Saddam is treacherous. We gotta get rid of this jerk. Do we need another horrible thing to happen before we do something?"

► **Joe Piastrelli**, Fischer's younger brother, was 8 when Fischer was killed in 1968:

"I don't think it'll be another Vietnam. We learned our lesson. For me, 9/11 was the biggest eye-opener. It showed we have to keep terrorism away from the U.S. We can't let terrorists have a base to build nuclear bombs and those kinds of weapons."

► **Deborah Brewer**, Fischer's sister, was 11 when he was killed:

"It'd be much better if we had the U.N. behind us. But if we don't do this, who else will?"

► **Richard Pinkerton**, Fischer's uncle, is a retired lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserves:

"What did Greg Fischer die for in Vietnam? No one knows. But Iraq would be different. The mission is clear. The only way to find out what happened to Saddam's stockpile of weapons is to go in and find out ourselves."

► **Allan Kepke**, a retired col-

lege theater professor, was related to Fischer by marriage:

"Just as a lot of middle-of-the-road Americans were radicalized by Vietnam, a lot of middle-of-the-road Muslims are going to be radicalized if we invade Iraq."

► **Steele Nowlin**, a schoolmate of Fischer's, is principal of their alma mater, Valley Forge High School:

"My personal opinion is that debate in the country has been pretty well stifled. The administration has done a good job of cramming this down everyone's throat."

► **Kayleigh Fitch**, a freshman at Valley Forge, is world news reporter for the school newspaper:

"The U.S. is like the popular kids at school, whom people are respectful to only because they're afraid of what might happen if they aren't. With power comes responsibility. If we're not careful, we could end up setting ourselves up for a big fall. I don't want to go in unless we have proof."

Parma, which ended up losing 34 young men in Vietnam, is still a relatively conservative, patriotic community. At Valley Forge High, about 10% of the senior class enlists in the military each year.

There's a bronze plaque at the bottom of a stairway with the name of Greg Fischer and 14 other graduates who went to Vietnam — "Valley Forge Patriots who died defending freedom," it says.

Things did not work out as Fischer planned in the letter he left behind for his family. His brother went to Ohio State for a year before deciding it was not for him. Instead of having a fancy wedding, his sister eloped and used the money to buy furniture.

But she is, as her older brother predicted, making some guy happy: her 2-year-old grandson. The boy is Gregory, named after the great uncle that he, and a lot of other people, never knew.