

when war hits home

The military embalmers who prepared the remains of Petty Officer Gary Rovinski recommended to the funeral directors back home that his body wasn't viewable.

The 44-year-old Naval Reservist died from head wounds when a roadside bomb exploded in Iraq as he was escorting supplies across the desert.

In Galesburg, Ill., funeral director Brad Collier faced a dilemma. A family friend told Collier that Rovinski's 10-year-old daughter was fixated by the news that her father was "blown up." The normally-chatty girl grew quiet, withdrawn.

After examining the body, Collier thought it was important for the girl to see her father one last time. When the soldier's widow and daughter arrived at the funeral home, the little girl stopped 15 feet from her father's casket. She had already recognized her dad's distinctive mohawk haircut.

Her father, in one piece, not a million.

For the first time since she learned her father had died, she began talking again.

As the thousands of American soldiers come home from Iraq to their final resting places, local funeral directors like Brad Collier are facing challenges not seen in this country since Vietnam: How public or how private should the service be? What facility is big enough to accommodate a large turnout? What do you do with protesters? Do you hold up the service for tardy politicians? Do you let a little girl see her father's traumatized body in the casket?

Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home, the funeral home where Collier works, handled three military funerals in the last year. For each service, thousands of mourners turned out for a meticulously planned hero's goodbye that galvanized the community, perhaps forever.

War will do that.

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“War Hits Home” screamed the front-page headline of the Nov. 4, 2005, edition of The Galesburg Register-Mail. Kyle Wehrly, a 28-year-old Illinois National Guardsman, was killed the day before by a roadside bomb explosion in Ashraf, Iraq, about 35 miles north of Baghdad. He was deployed just a week earlier with the 2nd Battalion 123rd Artillery’s Battery B out of Macomb.

Although more than 2,800 U.S. soldiers have been killed in Iraq since 2003, the toll seems heaviest in America’s small towns and cities, in places like Galesburg, population 34,500. Wehrly’s death shocked the western Illinois community, which is halfway between Peoria, Ill., and Davenport, Iowa, about 50 miles east of the Mississippi River. The city was built on agriculture, railroads and manufacturing. However, a number of factories have left town, notably the Maytag Corp. which closed its refrigeration plant in 2004, costing the community 1,600 jobs.

For the first two-and-a-half years of

the war in Iraq, the Galesburg community was unscathed. In fact, the area hadn’t suffered a wartime casualty since Aug. 17, 1970, when U.S. Air Force Capt. James W. Wood died in Vietnam.

It is the sad duty of a military casualty assistance officer to deliver the news to a family that their son or daughter, father or mother, brother or sister, has been killed. An initial phone call is followed up by a visit, and the casualty assistance officer will stay with a family through the funeral. On Nov. 3, Pvt. Andy Davis informed Wehrly’s family of his death. Wehrly was survived by his wife, Janet, and 6-year-old daughter, Kylee.

Two days later, Davis was sitting with Janet Wehrly in her living room. She wanted Davis to call the Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home and set up a meeting. The firm, which has two locations, in Galesburg and Abingdon, Ill., had directed the services for Janet Wehrly’s father a few years before. Now she was asking them to care for her husband. Funeral director Alan

Palmer answered the phone.

The family wanted to come out to the Galesburg location right away. Palmer arranged to meet them at 7:30 that evening. His job was to not only help a grieving family but a community as well.

A military funeral will draw potentially thousands of mourners, military and government officials, as well as local, state and national media. It is more than just a funeral; it is a hero’s farewell.

The funeral would be a high wire act for Palmer, trying to find the delicate balance between a personal goodbye and the formal farewell of a U.S. soldier. Since there hadn’t been a funeral for a soldier killed in the line of duty in Galesburg in 35 years, Palmer had to rely on his training, experience and a little help from some friends, both old and new.

A funeral director since 1989, Palmer has been at Hinchliff-Pearson-West for 15 years. He knew some members of the Wehrly family, but he didn’t know Kyle, who worked at a

local Lowe's store prior to his call up by the National Guard. He knew Kyle's father, the Rev. Peter Wehrly, who was at one time a minister in the Galesburg area. Kyle's brother, Lance, occasionally played the bugle at military services for Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home. But those were for veterans, not war victims.

At the funeral home that evening, Janet Wehrly spoke with Palmer for an hour about what she wanted. Davis was by the widow's side, explaining what options were available to the family from the military.

Palmer took her through the process step by step. He tried to prepare her for the flood of inquiries that were sure to follow from local and national media. How much did the family want the public, the military and the media to be involved in the process?

Janet decided that Davis was better equipped to handle the public. Palmer welcomed the assistance.

After discussing the service, the young widow wanted to look at the funeral home's selection of caskets. "I

think the military had given them the choice of a wooden or a metal casket," Palmer said. "Janet wanted to compare the two visually." She selected the wood casket.

Over the next few days, the military transported Kyle Wehrly's body from Iraq to the military mortuary facility at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Davis learned that Wehrly's body would be arriving at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago aboard a commercial United Airlines jet about 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 8.

Palmer dispatched funeral director Carrie Daniels in the Hinchliff-Pearson-West hearse to O'Hare to pick up the body. Davis and Janet Wehrly, who wanted to be there when her husband's body was taken off the plane, followed Daniels to the airport.

Palmer knew that the four-hour trip back from the airport would be an event so he stayed at the funeral home to coordinate a brief reception for the hearse's arrival.

Each time a soldier's body is shipped

back home, the military assigns an escort to fly with the casket, which is crated for travel. Sgt. Chris Tipton escorted Wehrly's body from Dover to Chicago. The two soldiers, the deceased and the escort, were the first off the jet. The casket was loaded onto a special luggage carrier, painted with American flags on all four corners. Even the tires were detailed. Airline employees saluted the casket as it made its way to the cargo terminal, located in the southwest corner of the airport.

At the terminal, workers uncrated

Photos on Page 20 & 21 (left to right): 1. Hundreds line the streets to honor Pfc. Caleb Lufkin as his body is brought through Knoxville on its way to the funeral home. 2. The blurred lights of the motorcade carrying the body of Kyle Wehrly. 3. The motorcade carrying the body of Gary Rovinski. 4. Hundreds of supporters line the road while they wait for the motorcade bearing the body of Gary Rovinski. **Below (left to right):** 1. A funeral wreath in honor of Kyle Wehrly. 2. Kyle Wehrly's father, the Rev. Peter Wehrly. 3. The military rifle squad stands at present-arms in the rain after firing a salute. (All photos courtesy of the Galesburg Register-Mail/Ken Exum.)

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the flag-draped casket and cargo personnel helped place it in the hearse. Davis, Tipton and Janet Wehrly looked on.

A police escort waited for the hearse to leave O'Hare for the trip back to Galesburg. As the hearse, which was followed by Davis, Tipton and Janet Wehrly, approached Knox County, additional Illinois State Police vehicles followed.

Local fire departments, Boy Scouts and volunteers parked on overpasses along the route. The number of spectators increased as the motorcade gradually approached Galesburg.

By the time the hearse reached the city limits, about 1,000 people lined the streets, many waving American flags. Ambulances parked along the roads with their lights flashing. Not all who came out to witness the motorcade knew Wehrly; some had only just heard of him. But one thing was clear: His funeral had already begun.

As the vehicles approached, the crowd surrounded the funeral home. About 10:30 p.m., the hearse parked on the street outside, while the Galesburg High School band played patriotic songs. To conclude the

service, a single bagpiper played "Amazing Grace."

"I knew that this was a big deal, and I hoped that there would be at least 20 to 50 people here," Palmer said. He was in awe when a crowd 200 times larger than what he had hoped for turned out. "There were a thousand people here. The whole front lawn of the funeral home was filled with people."

Though the size of the crowd was unexpected, not everything was impromptu. David Greenleaf, a retired master sergeant of the 123rd battalion Army National Guard, offered his assistance to the funeral home, in an unofficial capacity, to help with the memorial service. Since his retirement, Greenleaf has proactively sought to assist funeral directors with details in the funerals of veteran soldiers. Now he was offering his services for the funeral of a soldier killed in the line of duty.

Greenleaf invited the high school bands to come and play, and Palmer had secured the bagpiper.

The Family Readiness Group (FRG) also assisted the funeral home staff. Sponsored by the military, the group includes family members of soldiers belonging to a particular unit and other volunteers. Davis' wife, Greenleaf's wife and Janet Wehrly all belonged. The group offers mutual support and assistance, communications among the family members and community resources. The FRG purchased and distributed the hand-held American flags the spectators waved as the hearse approached the funeral home.

After the brief ceremony, Daniels pulled the hearse into the funeral home's garage. Janet Wehrly and other family members, including Kyle's mother, Nita Cross, stayed outside and greeted those who had turned out for the homecoming. The crowd stayed well past midnight.

When the body of a deceased soldier is delivered to a funeral home, the military requires a formal inspection by the funeral director and the escort. Palmer opened the casket. He thought the military embalmers did a good job preparing Kyle Wehrly's remains. Once

the inspection is complete, the military escort is relieved of his obligation, and control of the body is officially turned over to the funeral home.

"Just because the escort is relieved of his duty doesn't mean he doesn't want to help," Palmer said.

The next day, Nov. 9, Palmer, Davis, Janet Wehrly and Kyle Wehrly's parents sat down to make the formal arrangements. The first question to be answered was where would the visitation take place? Judging by the number of people who turned out to welcome the body from the airport, it was reasonable to expect a large crowd for the services.

Because of its size, the funeral home was not the best choice. "We went to Bethel Baptist Church, which has held all local military services," Palmer said. The church has a seating capacity of about 800, twice the size of the funeral home.

All funerals are about details — the larger the funeral, the more details. Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home has a staff of eight funeral directors and other full- and part-time staffers. A military funeral keeps everyone busy. Sometimes, it is not enough just to be diligent; sometimes a little luck is involved. Unfortunately, while planning this very large, very public event, the funeral home suffered a personal loss. Two days before Kyle Wehrly's service, Roger Hannam, who had been a funeral director for 40 years and continued to work part time for the funeral home after his retirement, suddenly passed away.

"I received the phone call from Roger's son two days before Kyle Wehrly's service," said Palmer, who, ironically, replaced Hannam on staff as a full-time funeral director. "That added some stress, I'll tell you that."

"Even though you do this for a living, when it's one of your own it is kind of hard to concentrate on such a large service," said Brad Collier, a funeral director who assisted Palmer with the Wehrly services.

Palmer was able to take care of both families. "I knew that Roger's service would be a couple days after Kyle's so

Sgt. Kyle Wehrly's wife, Janet, and daughter, Kylee, during a ceremony at the Knox County Courthouse. (Photo courtesy of the Galesburg Register-Mail by Ken Exum.)

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I knew I had some time,” Palmer said. “I wanted to get everything started with Roger’s service, and at the same time I finished up with Kyle’s. That’s what Roger would have wanted [for us] to go ahead and take care of business first and then take care of him.”

Palmer coordinated the details of Kyle Wehrly’s visitation and funeral with officials from Bethel Baptist Church. Among the details that were discussed was seating arrangements for the family as well as for dignitaries — a number of military and government officials were expected to attend.

Also, Palmer worked with the church on finding places for the media cameras where they would not disrupt the service. He coordinated the parking with the church, for the general public as well as valet for guests. Palmer kept the local police department in the loop so it could prepare to handle the crowd and traffic.

Despite being pulled in several direc-

tions at the same time, Palmer said he never lost sight of the family. “You have to tell them what is happening, what to expect. That’s what we do, that’s what they depend on us to do.”

At the funeral home, the Wehrly family was provided time for a private visitation. The public would come the next evening, Nov. 14, from 4-8 p.m. in the Bethel Baptist Church.

The next morning, Kyle Wehrly’s body was moved to the church. The funeral directors positioned the casket at the front of the church and opened it to reveal Wehrly laid out in his dress uniform.

Friends and townspeople who wanted to pay their respects began lining up well before 4 p.m. As mourners arrived, the line grew out the door and down the block. What was expected to be a four-hour visitation ended up lasting seven. The Wehrly family stood at the casket the whole time and greeted the visitors.

Palmer was flexible with the

amount of time allotted. “The support of this community was unbelievable,” Palmer said. “You expect that the funeral of a younger person, military, higher profile would attract more visitors, but wow, it was remarkable.”

Palmer even had to shield the family from a media-seeking church group that protests the funerals of soldiers. The Westboro Baptist Church contends that a soldier’s death is punishment from God for America’s tolerance of homosexuality. The members hold signs that read, “Burn in Hell” and “Thank God for IEDs” (improvised explosive devices, like the one that killed Wehrly).

At the time, there was no law in Illinois setting a minimal distance for funeral protests. Palmer and Greenleaf enlisted students from Knox College to stand silently in front of the group, blocking the church group’s members from the family’s view.

The funeral was scheduled for the next morning. Tuesday, Nov. 15, was

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a cold, miserable rainy day in Galesburg. "Rain in the grave makes for a happy funeral," Lance Wehrly told the crowd of 800 who filled the Bethel Baptist Church during the eulogy for his brother. He said he heard the expression years earlier when he was called on to play "taps" at a funeral.

The only way to orchestrate such a large funeral and have it go off flawlessly is to have a plan and stick to it. "It feels like you are in total chaos, but if you have enough people involved and they are reporting to you, and you know what's going on and you give out assignments and make sure everything is taken care of, it makes things a little easier," Palmer said.

But right before the service was slated to begin, some high ranking officers wanted some unscheduled private time with the Wehrly family.

While Palmer was able to accommodate the military dignitaries, he couldn't grant all the last-minute

requests — not even from the lieutenant governor. Palmer received a call from a representative of Illinois Lt. Gov. Patrick Quinn, who informed him that the politician was running late and wanted the service delayed until he arrived. Quinn attended the funerals of every one of the 81 soldiers from Illinois killed in Iraq to that point. Although Palmer wanted to be accommodating, the answer had to be no.

With five TV stations covering the event, the service began on schedule. As per Janet Wehrly's wishes, and Davis's instructions, the media was kept a respectful distance from the family.

In addition to Kyle's brother, Lance, the 90-minute service featured several speakers, including Kyle's father, the Rev. Peter Wehrly.

"It rained during the service, and it rained as we were dismissing the attendees after church," Palmer said.

More than 200 cars jammed the

church parking lot. "The local police did a fantastic job of blocking the streets off for us, so did the people at the church who helped park the cars during the service and visitation," he added.

As the funeral procession proceeded to East Linwood Cemetery, the rain slowed to a mist and then stopped completely.

When it was all over, Andy Davis presented Palmer with a coin of excellence for the Wehrly service on behalf of the 123rd Battalion Division. "It's not just for me, it was everyone on staff involved in the service, everyone at Bethel Baptist, David Greenleaf, the police and the cemetery as well," Palmer said.

What Palmer and Collier learned was to not be intimidated by the service. "It is still a funeral service you are in charge of," Collier said. "It works the same way. It is easy to get overwhelmed, but you know what you do best. This is no different."

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The State's 95th Casualty

What was, to that point, the largest service performed by the Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home would soon be topped by the funeral of another local soldier killed in Iraq. This time, for one of the funeral directors, it would take on a more personal tone.

On Thursday, May 25, 2006, Pvt. Caleb Lufkin, a 24-year-old from neighboring Knoxville, Ill., went into cardiac arrest during surgery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C. More than 40 doctors tried to revive him.

Lufkin, a member of Company B of the 5th Engineering Battalion, 1st Engineer Brigade out of Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., was seriously wounded May 4 when the vehicle he was riding in hit a roadside bomb in south-central Baghdad. Two other soldiers were killed instantly. Lufkin, who was able to escape the burning vehicle through the gunner's hole, suffered a badly damaged left leg and wounds to his arms and burns.

He received immediate care in Iraq and was then transported to Germany,

where surgeons repaired a severed artery in his wrist. Lufkin was flown to the United States and admitted to Walter Reed on May 7. The surgery was to treat the injured left leg. Cause of death was determined to be heart failure. He was the 95th casualty from Illinois in the Iraq war.

Brad Collier received the call from Marcy Gorsline, Lufkin's mother, on May 27, the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. Gorsline had just returned to Galesburg from Washington where she had hoped to help her son recover from surgery.

Collier, who has been a funeral director since graduating Southern Illinois University in 1979, grew up with the soldier's father, Tammy Lufkin. "I remember when he enlisted and when he received orders to go to Iraq, that was pretty devastating to his family," he recalled, adding that when Lufkin's tour of duty in Iraq was scheduled to conclude, he had plans to go to Sturgis, S.D., on motorcycles with Caleb, his father and others. Instead of vacationing with the family, Collier was called to bury their son.

"When this happened, it was a shock, a personal shock, because I had known him for so long," said Collier, who served as lead funeral director. "When his mother and father called ... what can you say ... it was just a terrible situation. We thought that when we got him back into the United States he would be all right. But there are no guarantees with any surgery."

Collier met with Lufkin's parents the next day at Gorsline's home. With the parents divorced, Collier wondered if this might cause some confusion over who had the final say in the arrangements. Tammy Lufkin told him that Caleb's mother would be making most of the arrangements.

It was *deja vu* for the funeral director. Instead of Andy Davis, it was Master Sgt. Brian Peterson, a U.S. Army casualty assistance officer from Bartonville, Ill., who met with Lufkin's parents privately to discuss the military benefit process.

Now on a second funeral working closely with the military, Collier also saw the emotional toll it takes on the soldiers. Peterson shared how difficult

it is to make the calls to families. “He said he wasn’t doing it very long, but he did not like that detail,” he said. “What an awful phone call to have to make.”

When he sat down with the parents, Collier said the discussion began with the funeral home’s experience handling Kyle Wehrly’s arrangements.

“We shared some memories, then we started talking about the types of services,” Collier said. One of the first decisions reached was that Caleb Lufkin would have an evening visitation. But where? Recalling the number of people at Wehrly’s service, Collier knew the funeral home would be too small.

“We considered the Knoxville High School, but then the family had a connection to the Bethel Baptist Church,” Collier said. “The Lufkin family knew the Wehrlys, and the service there went well, so we contacted the church, and the church welcomed the family with open arms.”

Was it the growing support by a community of its soldiers fighting an increasingly unpopular war, or was it that the Galesburg community was

indeed galvanized by the experience of taking Kyle Wehrly to his final resting place that made the services for Caleb Lufkin bigger? Most likely, the answer is both.

Coverage of Lufkin’s death was decidedly more intense. Every detail that would take place was the focus of a newspaper article or TV news segment.

“Dealing with the media is very draining, both physically and mentally,” Collier said. There are three TV stations in the Quad Cities, and there are three in Peoria. They all wanted to do a story. He did his best to prepare the family for the plethora of requests.

The May 30 edition of the Galesburg Register-Mail reported that Caleb Lufkin’s body would be flying into O’Hare International Airport that night about 9 p.m. One local radio station broadcast the motorcade’s progress on its trip back to Galesburg, live.

Joining in this motorcade were members of the Patriot Guard, a national group of motorcyclists devoted to honoring soldiers killed in the line of duty. The group organized in

November 2005 in Kansas to protect the grieving families of soldiers from the wrath of the Westboro Baptist Church. They would attend the funeral as well.

“The Patriot Guard is a very organized group,” Collier said. “They have actual road captains who organize the people. They are there mainly as a buffer.”

In a hard rain, the motorcade traveled on Interstate 80 and made a stop in Princeton, Ill., mainly so that the motorcycles could refuel. “This truck stop, called the Road Ranger Truck Stop, is where we first encountered other people waiting for the motorcade,” Collier said.

Like for the Wehrly service, the local

Below (from left to right): 1. Lindsey Peck, left, leans on the shoulder of her friend, Tara Peterson, as the two listen to ceremonies honoring Caleb Lufkin. 2. The body of Pfc. Caleb Lufkin is carried to a hearse following the funeral. 3. Marcy Gorsline, mother of Pfc. Caleb Lufkin, is consoled by her husband, Dennis, after receiving the flag that was draped over her son’s casket. 4. A cardboard sign with the word “Hero” is carried by one of hundreds who turned out to show their support. (All photos courtesy of the Galesburg Register-Mail/Kent Kriegshauser)

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fire department was on hand along with people holding flags and candles, standing at attention to pay their respects.

From Princeton there were one state police vehicle, 35 Patriot Guard motorcycles and the hearse. The closer the procession got to Galesburg, the more people at different exits joined in.

The Blue Knights, a motorcycle group of police officers, joined the motorcade near the Quad Cities. “We had volunteer fire departments, a lot of different people joined in,” Collier said. “It seemed like every overpass had someone on it.”

Collier estimated more than 15,000 people lined the published route. According to the Galesburg Register-Mail, the procession hit Main Street in Knoxville at 11:25 p.m. “We came through Knoxville and through East Galesburg and Galesburg,” he said. “There were people lining that route all the way. They had flags, candles. It was a very humbling experience as a funeral director.”

The show of affection and respect for the fallen soldier moved a military veteran — Master Sgt. Mike Harrington, the escort from Fort Leonard Wood. “He had tears running down his cheeks,” Collier said. “He’s been everywhere and has never experienced such patriotism as what he saw lining the route, and he’s been in the service for over 20 years.”

With more than 100 vehicles in line, the hearse arrived at the funeral home about midnight. More than 3,000 people packed the front yard of the

funeral home to welcome Lufkin home.

Collier credited David Greenleaf for the reception at home. “He’s got some phone numbers that I’m sure everybody would like to have.”

The funeral director talked to the Lufkin family about three times a day on different details. “We had already discussed the type of service, where it was going to be and when, the visitation, the minister,” Collier said. He also met with the military and found out exactly what it wanted to do. All of which had to be approved by the family.

The Lufkin family arrived at the church at 4 p.m. on Thursday, June 1, for the public visitation. There was a private viewing for the family the day before at the funeral home. The church would be open to the public from 5 to 8 p.m., with the open casket set up in the front of the church. Collier estimated that 3,000 people passed by the casket, the single line of visitors snaking out of the church and down the block.

For the better part of 10 hours, the Lufkin family stood next to the casket to greet visitors. “I couldn’t believe it,” Collier said. “We kept our eyes on them and gave them water or anything else they needed.” The last passer-by exited the church near 1 a.m. Collier was exhausted but couldn’t stop thinking about the family, who stood on their feet for the better part of nine hours.

Collier helped lock the church at 2 a.m. At 7:30 a.m., he arrived back at the funeral home to prepare for the 11 a.m. funeral. He was running on

Above: Family and friends gather for the funeral of Pfc. Caleb Lufkin at Knoxville Cemetery. (Photo Courtesy of Galesburg Register-Mail.)

adrenaline, checking and rechecking his list.

“I had all of the family meet in the Learning Center at the church, I had the honor guard from Fort Leonard Wood in the library,” Collier said. “We had the sanctuary reserved, a section for family, a section for military, a row for the pallbearers, a row for the local and state dignitaries, including Lt. Gov. Quinn. We reserved a row for anyone who was participating in the service in front so they would have easy access to step up to the lectern.”

All the pieces were in place. However, minutes before the scheduled start, Quinn wanted to speak with the family privately. Also, a U.S. Army general wished to speak with the family. “A number of dignitaries wanted to have private time with the family,” Collier said. “They call us funeral directors and it is like putting on a show in a sense. Our job is to make sure everyone is where they are supposed to be at the right time, but that doesn’t always work. It was a little stressful to keep the service moving.”

Collier led the family from the Learning Center to a staging area for a final viewing. Then he escorted them to their seats. With the family seated, Collier returned to the staging area and closed the casket.

The military honor guard took the casket down to the front of the church in formation. “Fortunately, everybody was in the right place at

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the right time,” Collier said. “It was a bit nerve-wracking.”

Twelve members of the Westboro Baptist Church received a permit to picket the funeral. But according to a new Illinois state law, signed into law just eight days before Caleb Lufkin died, the group had to stand outside a 200-foot buffer from the church. This time offering to serve as a barrier were about 300 members of the Patriot Guard, who lined the streets around the church with full-sized flags, which they held for the duration of the church service.

“You didn’t even know they were there,” said Collier, referring to the Westboro church members.

Inside, the crowd of more than 800 heard the Rev. Ernie Pizzamiglio read many stories written by family members about Caleb Lufkin, including one where Lufkin said to his mother on his first day of kindergarten, “I’ll be OK, Mom.” He said the same thing to her before leaving for Iraq.

Following the two-hour church service, Hinchliff-Pearson-West staffers, police and church employees worked together to organize the funeral procession that would take Caleb Lufkin to his final resting place in Knoxville Cemetery. According to the Galesburg Register-Mail, the procession included an Illinois State Police vehicle, a police officer on a

motorcycle, two East Galesburg firetrucks (Lufkin was a volunteer fireman), the hearse, two limousines with the family, 157 motorcycles, two Galesburg police cars and 178 other vehicles.

The Knoxville police and auxiliary were out in full force to ensure a safe arrival for mourners at the cemetery.

Collier knew the church would be able to accommodate a large crowd, but what about the cemetery?

“We’re lucky that the cemetery has a very large grass area, a new section that has not been used, and they took care of parking all of the vehicles so it worked extremely well,” he said.

The military honor guard instructed the funeral home staff to position the casket from east to west so the rifle squad could fire the 21-gun salute over his left shoulder.

“We had to reserve an area at a 45 degree angle from the body so the riflemen could fire and where the honor guard could fold the flag,” Collier said. “It was quite an effort keeping that area open.”

It took 20 minutes from the time the lead cars arrived at the cemetery before everyone was parked and walked to the tent before the committal could begin.

The family was presented with Lufkin’s Combat Action badge, a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.

The crowd flinched at the sound when the seven riflemen fired their guns in each of the three volleys. Next, the military honor guard removed the American flag from the casket, folded it precisely and presented it to Lufkin’s mother. A bagpiper played as the visitors said goodbye one final time to the soldier.

At the conclusion of the 20-minute service, Hinchliff-Pearson-West limousines took the family back to the church.

Collier can no longer hear the news of a U.S. casualty without assigning a face to the statistic. “It’s made me more aware and concerned about what is going on over there,” Collier said. “When you hear it happening, it touches home. It is just amazing every night on the news you hear it and, my God, I know what they are going through. I think of Caleb leaving, a young man, a lot of energy and I never thought he wouldn’t make it back home.”

He recalled something that Sgt. Harrington told him about Caleb Lufkin, when he was lying in the hospital. Lufkin asked Harrington, “When can I go back?”

“That was very touching, the dedication that he had,” Collier said. “They had this attitude, they are trained for it. That’s their job and they want to go back.”

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Three Days Later

Following a quiet weekend, Brad Collier was finishing up some paperwork left over from the Lufkin service when he received a call that another area soldier, Petty Officer Gary Rovinski, died June 5 from head wounds sustained in a roadside bomb explosion in Al Anbar Province, Iraq.

Rovinski, 44, was a Naval reservist serving with the Seabees of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 25 out of Fort McCoy, Wis. He was sent to Iraq in March 2006 and worked on a convoy security team, escorting supplies across the desert.

Rovinski, who is survived by his wife, Jen, and two daughters, CeCe, 13, and Michaela, 10, was from Roseville, about 30 miles from Galesburg. "I was going to call the funeral home down there and let them know that we would help," Collier said. The next thing he knew, the Rovinski family called Hinchliff-Pearson-West and asked them to handle the service.

"I was quite surprised to get the call because they are 30 miles away, with two communities between us," Collier said. He suspected that it was his firm's handling of the two other services that led the family to call. Also, the church that the Rovinski family belongs to in Monmouth, Ill., is a sister church to Bethel Baptist Church, where the last

two military services directed by Hinchliff-Pearson-West were held.

The choice of a funeral home so far away did cause a backlash in the Roseville community. "I do know that some in Roseville were not happy about it," Collier said. "Why, I don't know."

In fact, The Galesburg Register-Mail ran a story noting that the selection of Hinchliff-Pearson-West and of Bethel Baptist Church was a coincidence and that there are no special arrangements between the military, the funeral home or the church.

On June 7, Collier met with the Navy's casualty assistance officer at the Rovinski home. "They said they were impressed how we handled the others, and they wanted to know if we would handle theirs," Collier recalled.

In the span of two weeks, Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home would direct two large, high profile military funerals. The contacts made during the first two services proved to be invaluable. The Patriot Guard again rolled to meet with the motorcade returning Rovinski's body to his hometown.

On the way back from O'Hare, the motorcade again stopped at the Road Ranger Truck Stop to allow the Patriot Guard motorcycles to refuel. The Rovinski family did not travel all the way to the airport to meet the body.

Instead, they waited at the truck stop for the motorcade to arrive.

"At the truck stop, they had a separate dining room around the side of the building where they let the family wait and offered them refreshments," Collier said. "When I arrived, they led me around the side of the building, away from the Patriot Guard and everyone, to allow the family to have some private time. I had no idea that was going to happen. We just pulled in, and this guy said that the family was in a private dining room. It was a very touching moment. The first time seeing the casket, it was an unusual location, but they did a wonderful job."

Perhaps some Roseville residents were upset because they wanted to be part of the same type of welcome home ceremony for Rovinski as they had read about for Wehrly and Lufkin. To accommodate Rovinski's hometown, the motorcade rode through Monmouth to Roseville, where Rovinski lived, then doubled back again through Monmouth to Monmouth College, where Rovinski had been employed.

"That's where they had the same type of ceremony they had at the funeral home," Collier said. With the approval of Jen Rovinski, a large gathering of friends and neighbors waited at the college for the motorcade to arrive. A bagpiper played, and to close the brief

ceremony, a bugler played “taps.” After the stop in Monmouth, it was off to Galesburg to the funeral home.

“We went through the same detail as before,” Collier said, referring to the military’s inspection of a body before turning it over to the funeral home. “Different branch of the service, but they operate the same way.”

While many of the aspects of the three military funerals had their similarities, there were circumstances that required individual attention.

With Rovinski, the extent of his injuries suggested that his body would not be viewable — a decision reached by the military embalmers who had prepared his remains. However, the staff at Hinchliff-Pearson-West disagreed. “As part of the required inspection, we did take part of the wrap off, and [I thought] he was viewable,” Collier said.

When Jen Rovinski came to the funeral home to view her husband’s body, she brought her 10-year-old daughter with her. A minister who came with them suggested that he didn’t think the girl should see him.

A friend of the family told Collier that the girl was not acting like herself since she learned her father had died, which was understandable. She was normally chatty and demonstrative, but since her father’s death she was very quiet.

Collier learned that the family had heard news reports of Rovinski’s death, and one of the terms that stuck with the child was that her father was “blown up.” There is no telling what a 10-year-old’s imagination would do with that description. It was Collier’s recommendation to allow the girl to see her father.

“Rovinski always wore his hair short, a mohawk cut,” Collier said. “We were in the room, mother, daughter and I, and we were 15 feet from the casket. The girl didn’t want to go any further because she had already recognized her father’s haircut.

“When she saw that the body in the casket was her father, she realized that he wasn’t blown up so to speak,” Collier said. “After she recognized her father, her disposition changed, and she became herself again. It was very important for her to see for herself.”

The family did decide on a closed casket for the public visitation.

The two-hour service featured a seven-minute video tribute to Rovinski that was backed by a recorded track of songs sung by his wife.

Although Lt. Gov. Quinn was tardy for the service, once again the decision was made to go ahead with the service.

“There are times when you still have to be right in the middle of everything,”

Collier said. “You hope you are not intruding, but you are the funeral director and you are in charge. It looks like you’re pushing people, but you have to. Your ultimate goal is to make it go smooth for the family.”

Collier didn’t need to be reminded that a funeral director can never have “just another day,” but he admitted that after three military funerals, to go through what he experienced made him a better funeral director.

“Watching the precision of the military does bring the best out of you,” he said. “Our staff gears toward that military precision. When we’re being pallbearers, you need to be professional all the time, always in step. If a nonchalant attitude creeps in, someone is going to see that; you never know who is watching you.”

And funeral directors don’t always know the effect they have on the lives of those who turn to them for help. But at least one funeral director saw the difference he made for a 10-year-old when war hit home. •

Below (from left to right): 1. A Navy officer kneels before Rovinski’s wife to present the flag that had been draped over her husband’s casket. 2. Flowers adorn the casket of Petty Officer 1st Class Gary Rovinski. 3. Brad Collier of Hinchliff-Pearson-West funeral home assists Rovinski’s wife, after his graveside service. (Photos courtesy of Galesburg Register-Mail/Ken Exum and Kent Kriegshauser.)

The Funeral Starts With the First Call

After securing the details of when Kyle Wehrly's body was going to arrive at O'Hare International Airport, funeral director Alan Palmer instructed a staff member to drive the firm's hearse to pick up the body and not the first call sport-utility vehicle. Palmer knew there would be spectators along the way, welcoming home an American hero.

Even before the body was removed from the plane, Kyle Wehrly's funeral had started.

The airline knew it, too. United Airlines rolled out a special cart to transport the casket from the plane to the cargo terminal. The cargo vehicle used by the airline was detailed with American flags. There were a number of men from United Airlines dressed in suits and ties, and women dressed in suits, assisting in the delivery of the casket to the terminal. Other employees saluted the casket as it passed by.

The funeral doesn't begin at the funeral home or in the church; the funeral begins with the call to the funeral home.

It's all in the little details. For example, some funeral homes keep an American flag in their first call vehicles, just in case the body they are picking up is a deceased veteran. Taking the remains out in a flag-draped stretcher is more dignified than a gray body bag.

With all of the details in a military funeral, Hinchliff-Pearson-West's Palmer and Brad Collier say the No. 1 priority is to not lose sight of the family. "Let them know at every step what is going to happen next," said Collier. "That's what they are depending on you for. They are your priority. Don't get distracted or overwhelmed.

Reflecting on the event, Palmer said the most difficult part was just keeping organized, knowing what to do next, making sure everyone was in the proper place and that everybody knew what was going to happen next. "Plus handling all the phone calls from the local police, radio stations, newspapers and still keeping focus on the wants and needs of the family," he added. "You had so

many different phone calls coming at you from different angles. You had to step back and think through what you want to do next.

"There is so much pulling at you, everybody wanting to help," he added. "They are all meaning well but there are times it pushes you to your limits. Prepare them for what they are going to experience."

Inside the funeral home, the staff needs to be on the same page. "Make sure you keep control of the situation and of what is being done," Collier said.

Sometimes it might be necessary for smaller funeral homes to call in reinforcements. A good working relationship with competitors will help. Also, if a competitor is scheduled to have a large service, offer to help before being asked. "If a service goes bad, it reflects on everybody. Offer manpower to help, logistical support. Keep in mind that we are funeral professionals, and we all want it to go well," Collier said.

The police departments will be required to do many things during the course of the visitation and the funeral. "Keep them in the loop," Collier advised. "When you receive this call for a military funeral, contact local authorities."

An extra set of hands in a military funeral could also come from the military escort who accompanies the body back to the hometown. "Even though he is relieved of his duties when you sign the form for the body, he's still there and you might as well put him to work," Palmer said. "He wants to be involved. It is another person who can help you. He can certainly save you a lot of work."

Even when you have enough people, organization is the key. "I carry a notebook, you have to write this stuff down," said Collier. "We almost had the family going into Kyle's service, but we didn't have the pallbearers in there yet. I said, 'Hey Al, you got to get your pallbearers over here.' You need to depend on your staff and people."

Palmer noted that, in many cases, funeral directors try to be all things to a family. For a service the size of a military funeral, that just isn't possible. "It's important to have enough people around you to watch your back. You can't do it alone," he said. "It's nice to know that someone is going to be behind you. You're in charge, you're directing everything, but it's nice to know that someone is going to be behind you."

"I did get to meet quite a few military officers who said that we had done a wonderful job and were impressed by the organization," Palmer said. "We couldn't have done it without the church. I can't stress enough — you need a good working relationship with a lot of people to do something of this size." •

Funeral directors Alan Palmer (left) and Brad Collier.

All About Patriotism

In the summer of 2005, a group from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., began picketing the funerals of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq.

The group, under the leadership of the Rev. Fred Phelps, believes that war casualties are the direct result of the United States' acceptance of homosexuality. One by one, states signed into law a bill that bans protests at funerals.

As a result, a number of states began enacting legislation to ban protests at funerals. On the national level, President George W. Bush signed the Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act, which prohibits disruptions of military funerals in national cemeteries.

But in November 2005, a more grass-roots organization formed to protect the families of grieving soldiers from abuse. The Patriot Guard was founded that month and in a year's time grew to include 56,000 members nationwide.

According to its mission statement posted on its web site (www.patriotguard.org), "The Patriot Guard Riders is a diverse amalgamation of riders from across the nation. We have one thing in common besides motorcycles. We have an unwavering respect for those who risk their very lives for America's freedom and security. If you share this respect, please join us.

"We don't care what you ride or if you ride, what your political views are, or whether you're a hawk or a dove. It is not a requirement that you be a veteran. It

doesn't matter where you're from or what your income is; you don't even have to ride. The only prerequisite is Respect."

Funeral director Brad Collier of Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home in Galesburg, Ill., first encountered the Patriot Guard while directing a service for Caleb Lufkin, a 24-year-old U.S. Army private who died May 25 from injuries sustained May 4 by a roadside bomb in Iraq.

"The Patriot Guard is a very organized group," Collier said. "They have actual road captains who organize the people. They are there mainly as a buffer. Once the Westboro group started to interfere with military services, they organized to overshadow any type of protest."

The Patriot Guard's main mission is to attend the funeral services of fallen American heroes as invited guests of the family. They also ride to welcome home soldiers returning from active duty.

The group will contact a family to see if their presence would be welcome — the initial contact with the family to offer their services. Collier emphasized that the Patriot Guard is nonconfrontational. "Their first concern is the family and the respect for the fallen soldier," he said.

"They organize before the service at a different location," Collier said. "They have a prayer that they say. They don't talk to anyone; they don't react to any verbal abuse given to them. They are so organized it is unbelievable."

Local motorcycle riders are allowed to ride with the Patriot Guard. "That's when they explain their purpose," Collier said. "If you get out of line, you're gone. They are not there to cause any type of a problem."

The Patriot Guard has a team that trails behind them during the services, offering water for the people who are standing with the flags. If someone needs a rest, someone else steps in. At no time do the Patriot Guard members enter the church. If any one of them has to use the restroom, they need to go somewhere else. They are just mainly outside on the perimeter of the grounds of the church.

Local motorcycle riders are allowed to ride with the Patriot Guard. You don't even have to be a rider to stand with them.

"That's when they explain their purpose," Collier said. "If you get out of line, you're gone. They are not there to cause any type of a problem."

So impressed with the Patriot Guard, Collier, a motorcyclist, joined the group himself. So did his wife. •

Left: Motorcycles escort the hearse with the body of Pfc. Caleb Lufkin. (Photo courtesy of the Galesburg Register-Mail/Ken Exum.)