



STEVI HILLMAN IS RUNNING FOR MARINE MAJ. MEGAN M. MCCLUNG

34, of Coupeville, Wash.; assigned to the I Marine Expeditionary Force Headquarters Group, I MEF, Camp Pendleton, Calif.; killed Dec. 6 while supporting combat operations in Anbar province, Iraq.



Legacy of female major killed in Iraq grows
By Mike Barber, Seattle Post-Intelligencer via AP

COUPEVILLE, Wash. — After they received the hard news of their daughter's death in Iraq in December 2006, Mike and Re McClung cloaked themselves in solitude, declining requests for interviews.

But then, Re McClung says, “we had a visitation.”

From a dream, a sense, an energy, a voice, Re heard her dead daughter clearly tell the couple to break their silence.

“She said, ‘Mom, there’s something you want to say; you better take your sound bite,’” Re McClung says of the experience.

They were not surprised. Maj. Megan Malia Leilani McClung stood a mere 5 feet 4 inches and weighed only 125 pounds, but her spirit was a giant and had been since childhood.

When they reached out and began to hear back, the McClungs learned that as a woman and a Marine, their daughter had touched more people in more ways than they could fathom.

Wanting to learn more, “we told people, don’t send us flowers, tell us her story,” Mike McClung says.

Eighteen months after McClung, 34, was killed by a bomb that blew up her up-armored Humvee, responses arrive every day.

Many are e-mails from strangers, like one from the veteran Marine sergeant major who wept for her. Others are almost surreal. Six people, some complete strangers, named newborn daughters Megan, promising one day to tell their girls about their namesake. Drawings from





schoolchildren, quilts, photos and messages from people who met their daughter only briefly yet came away feeling valued, arrive out of the blue. Privates and generals weigh in, as do the famous and the unknown.

“She’s become,” her mom says, “bigger than life, as if her energy and spirit are in people now.”

Long before her daughter began the first of her several tours in Iraq, before she became the highest-ranking female military officer and first female Naval Academy graduate to die in Iraq, Re McClung felt something different about this conflict.

“I don’t think the typical American realizes that the face of this war has changed. This one has a woman’s face,” Re McClung says.

Despite the military prohibition against women serving in combat units, military women aren’t confined to jobs as nurses or administrative or intelligence duties behind the lines as they were in past wars.

They sling rifles and drive armored trucks in convoys, guard checkpoints, fly helicopters and serve as combat medics and MPs.

As of May, nearly 100 American servicewomen were among the more than 4,000 troops killed, according to Pentagon statistics. More than two-thirds were killed in action by hostile fire. More than 20 left behind children. More than half were younger than 25, according to Defense Department statistics.

After seven years in Afghanistan and five in Iraq, it amounts to more women killed in action by direct enemy fire than in all U.S. wars combined in the past half-century.

Women also have returned in greater numbers with traumatic brain injury, amputations, burns and post-traumatic stress disorder. Veterans medical centers now have special women’s clinics, treating not only war injuries, but also the damage inflicted physically and mentally by sexual assault from fellow male troops.

In the McClung residence, a long “brag wall” is filled with frames of their redheaded daughter’s academic, athletic and military achievements. Her Marine officer’s sword. Her Boston University master’s degree. Her many triathlon and marathon championships. Her medals.

Thick albums are packed with photos. Megan McClung started collecting inspiring quotes on scraps of paper at age 9. One she lived by: “To do anything but your best is to waste the gift.”





Still unopened are packs of McClung's photos returned with her belongings. Her mom can't bring herself to go through them.

Outside is "Megan's Garden," with a model of a memorial inspired by McClung, who was a public affairs officer in Iraq. One day a larger version will be dedicated to combat correspondents and fallen communicators at Fort Meade, Md.

"Memorial Day is now different because it is no longer different," her dad says. "Every day is Memorial Day."

Because their daughter was concerned about wounded troops and their families, the couple channel their energy into supporting beneficial charities to help them. The McClungs, after all, are a military family: mother and father, daughter and a son, Michael Jr.

Megan McClung was born in Hawaii and graduated from high school in Mission Viejo, Calif. She was precocious and a top gymnast. Once she sought to improve strength but was rejected from the boy's weightlifting program, so she took her case to the school board and won.

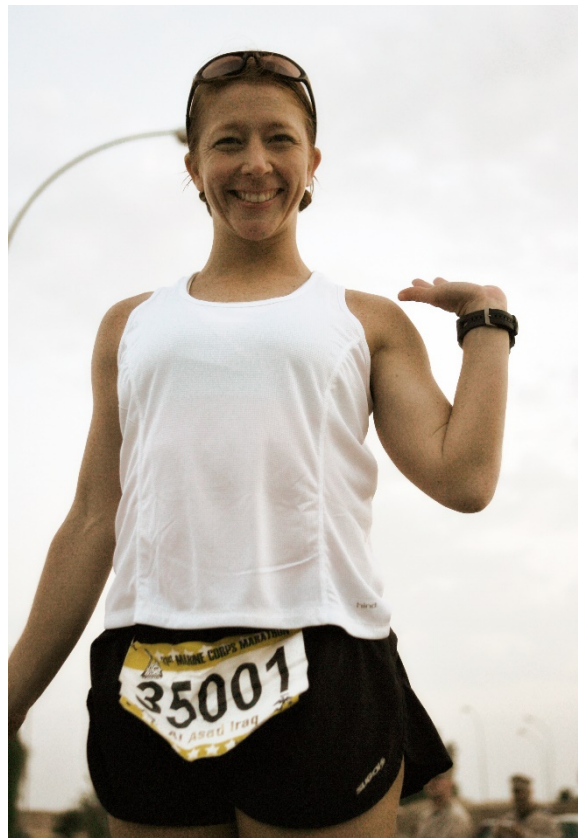
The senior prom was one of her few dates. Gymnastics and homework were her routine. Her parents never suspected she wanted to attend the naval academy until she announced she needed them to attend a reception for appointees.

She graduated from the academy in 1995.

Her dad, Mike, 65, grew up an Army brat. His father, a World War II veteran, once ran the stockade at Fort Lewis. McClung herself served in the Marines as an officer in Vietnam during the 1968 Tet offensive, then earned a doctorate and worked for a defense contractor's classified and unclassified projects.

Her mother, Re, 61, was the daughter of a Navy officer who once flew seaplanes at Whidbey Island Naval Air Station. Re McClung spent a career in education, also earning a doctorate and becoming an assistant school superintendent. Both retired in 2004 and moved from California to Coupeville.

Megan McClung wanted to fly in the Navy but learned early she got airsick. She wanted to serve in the infantry, but frontline jobs aren't open to women.





She found a way around as a public affairs officer and combat correspondent, telling her dad “the nicest thing about being a public affairs officer is that I can do everything the infantry guys do, but I don’t have to do the paperwork.”

McClung had been married to a Marine pilot, but the forced separation of the service brought the marriage to an end.

When she went back to Iraq in 2006, McClung had a new man in her life waiting at home, a Marine who left the service so they wouldn’t risk separations again.

He planned to propose when she returned.

“We knew our little girl but we didn’t know the woman she became. We didn’t know how good she was as a Marine, how competent and highly regarded she was,” her mom says.

The testimonials came from male Marines, whose respect was difficult for a woman to earn.

A colonel lightheartedly wrote that “he had worked for Megan” when she was a prepared and confident lieutenant.

A commanding officer said she could outshoot anyone not wearing an expert rifle or pistol badge, do dead-hang pull-ups and at the end of her very long and busy days in Iraq, earn a master’s degree.

“She could outrun all but four people in the entire camp,” her former commander said, calling her “a dear friend ... a warrior — a Marine.”

If Marines didn’t know her, they knew of her.

Some young Marines newly returned from missions in the field in Iraq —tired, dirty, hungry — were turned away by the KBR contractor running the mess hall, told “no food” until they showered.

“Megan saw that and immediately took KBR to task. Those men got fed. That story about the redheaded captain went rampant, all over, because she understood what the mission was and who was important,” the troops, Re McClung says.

McClung was in the last month of her deployment when she died. She was in downtown Ramadi doing her job.





She had picked up Fox News' Oliver North that night and was to have escorted him the next morning, but swapped with a gunnery sergeant to take a Newsweek crew.

Journalists appreciated her integrity and tenacity. She opened doors to the military and Iraqis.

The Humvee in which she rode was behind the Newsweek crew's when the bomb exploded.

She died quickly, a blessing in a way, her mother says.

Maj. Megan McClung was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery on a cloudy, chill morning on Dec. 19, 2006. So many people are being buried in Arlington that the McClungs had to reserve a 7:30 a.m. time slot. The sun broke out during the service.

More than 700 people attended.

And they remember her still.

In the last year, the shoes that her running partner in Iraq left at her grave, which cemetery rules require to be removed every month, keep reappearing.

Her headstone is engraved with her mantra, fitting perhaps for someone whose life was short but lived so well:

"Be bold, be brief, be gone."

