



## **STEVI HILLMAN IS RUNNING FOR ARMY CPL. MICHELLE R. RING**

24, of Martin, Tenn.; assigned to the 92nd Military Police Battalion, Fort Benning, Ga.; died July 5 of wounds sustained from enemy mortar fire in Baghdad.

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska — After seeing her boyfriend killed in an Anchorage parking-lot fight, she moved to Tennessee.

Five years later, with a crumbled marriage and two young boys, her job in a sweltering small-town factory could barely keep the lights on.

On her lunch break two years ago, she looked up and saw a highway sign: The Army.

Ring was a single parent and the country was at war, but she needed to start again. She enlisted and went to boot camp. Late last year, she shipped out from Fort Benning, Ga., to Baghdad.

Her family said she'd finally found her place in the world. The Army brought structure and purpose, but in recent months she told her family that the violence around her seemed to be getting worse. She said she worried she wouldn't make it back to her children.

Then last week two soldiers drove up the rocky driveway of her sister's house in Wasilla. Ring, 26, had been killed July 5 by mortar fire while taking a break from a patrol, they said.

Cpl. Ring was the second female soldier with Alaska ties killed in a week's time.

Ring grew up in Chugiak, the youngest of three sisters. She met her best friend, Chrystle Lyon, at Gruening Middle School.

“We got along well. Even when we didn't get along, we made up,” said Lyon, who lives in Peters Creek. “We could read each other's minds.”





The girls liked to play rough — four-wheeling, driving cars off-road, camping. Studying wasn't their thing. Lyon ended up in military school. Ring dropped out. At 17, she quickly fell for Marc Hopfenspirger, a 21-year-old soldier from Fort Richardson.

On a June night in 1999, the girls were out with Hopfenspirger when he got tangled in a late-night parking-lot fight outside a grocery store. Someone threw a beer bottle, a shard broke, it bounced off his Jeep and sliced his throat.

“We had gone to go get a soda,” Lyon said. “We came back around, and he was lying on the ground bleeding to death.”



Hopfenspirger died at the scene. It wasn't until last summer that police arrested Esau Fualema for throwing the bottle. He was charged with second-degree murder.

After Hopfenspirger's death, depression overtook Ring. She began putting on weight and wearing baggy clothes.

That fall, as Ring was trying on a dress for her sister's wedding, her mother discovered that underneath her sweatshirts, Ring was eight months pregnant with Hopfenspirger's son. She hadn't told anyone, even Lyon.

“When it all came out that we all knew, she was happy, but I think she was really confused in the beginning. She didn't know what to do,” said her sister in Wasilla, Karen Harbuck.

After the baby, Marc, was born, Ring got her GED and moved to Tennessee, where her parents lived. She took a job at a Tyson chicken processing plant. Things started to settle down. She met the father of her second son, Brandon. They married briefly, but it didn't work out. She had another relationship, but it ended before a year's time.

“She was always looking for Marc, the one that she lost, and she never found him,” Lyon said.

Being a soldier changed Ring, her family said. It gave her confidence and direction she never had, they said.

“Finally, she was someone and she was doing something,” said Harbuck. “She wanted her boys taken care of, was her major thing.”

She loved boot camp, the tanks, the guns, the exercise, and the people, her mother said. She didn't like Baghdad. Shelling woke her at night, and everything seemed to be deteriorating. She couldn't tell that they were making a difference.



“She said the air just stinks and it’s healthier to smoke a cigarette than to breathe,” Harbuck said.

Her family communicated with her in brief phone calls, e-mails and on MySpace.com. Her profile page is bathed in purple and decorated with pictures of her sons, her tattoos, and herself, in uniform, leaning on a tank.



In one blog entry, in March, she wrote: “I feel so lost. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. Every day it’s the same thing and the same people tell me what I need to do. It has just put me here in this place where I am lost. No way out.”

Another sister, Marilyn Haybeck, responded:

“Shell, it will be all right, just give them a piece of your mind like you do to everyone else. You don’t have to much longer.”

Since her death, tribute messages from friends and family have filled the page.

When she came to her parents’ house on leave for the last time at the end of April, she didn’t want to go back.

“She was scared, she didn’t think she was going to make it - it was just getting too bad over there,” Harbuck said.

Her feelings were mixed and complicated. She didn’t want to start over, outside of the military. She recently told her sister she’d re-enlisted.

On July 5, back in Baghdad, some friends brought Ring dinner while she was on a patrol at Camp Liberty, her sister said. She had been training to become a military police officer. Rockets screamed into their compound and exploded. A piece of metal hit Ring in the chest. She died almost immediately. No one else was hurt.

Ring was born in Oregon. Her parents, John and Shirley Stearns, and her sister, Haybeck, live in McMinnville outside of Portland. Marc’s been with them since she deployed. Brandon, 5, lives with his father in Tennessee. A funeral service will be held July 14 in Portland. An Alaska memorial hasn’t yet been planned.

