



JIMMIE SMITH IS RUNNING FOR ARMY SPC. ERICA P. ALECKSEN

21, of Eatonton, Ga.; assigned to 978th Military Police Company, 93rd Military Police Battalion, Fort Bliss, Texas; died July 8 in Maidan Shahr, Afghanistan, of wounds caused by an improvised explosive device. Also killed were Army Staff Sgt. Ricardo Seija, Army Spc. Clarence Williams III, Army Spc. Trevor B. Adkins, Army Spc. Alejandro J. Pardo and Army Spc. Cameron J. Stambaugh.

EATONTON, Ga For a few hours, at least, everyone could suspend reality. As long as they talked about her, she couldn't really be gone — not dead, no, not killed a world away, not lying in a coffin bound for Georgia.

And so they waited in line at Maurine and Harold Huggins' home to pay their respects. They came from just down the street and from across the county, from New York and St. Louis and California. On a Friday grumbly with thunder, they recalled Erica Alecksen — granddaughter, daughter, sister, cousin, wife, friend, soldier.

Putnam County Sheriff Howard Sills was first to stop by. He stepped through the doorway and paused to view her portrait in the foyer: Army Spc. Alecksen, 21, uniform pressed, hair pulled back, and smile in place. She was the second oldest of the Hugginses' nine grandchildren.

“In a small town, everybody calls the sheriff,” Sills said. “I don't think I've ever had so many calls from people asking what they can do to help.”

Erica — only her sergeants and officers called her by her last name — died July 8 in Afghanistan. Attached to the 978th Military Police Company, she was riding in a large truck when it ran over an IED, or improvised explosive device. The blast killed six soldiers.

Erica became the third woman from Georgia to die in the fighting since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. More than 240 U.S. female combatants have died in war operations since then.

With her death, the conflict came home to Eatonton, 80 miles east of Atlanta. “You knew she was over there,” said Bruce Morris, Erica's youth pastor at Eatonton First United Methodist Church until she graduated from Putnam County High School in 2009. “You knew it could happen. But then you think, ‘It's not real. It's not right.’”





It's unfair for someone who embraced life so fully to lose hers so soon, said Julia McKelvey of Chamblee. At 31, she's the oldest of the Huggins grandchildren, Erica's cousin. A native of Atlanta, she grew up visiting Eatonton, playing with the red-haired little girl who'd one day turn her gaze to the world beyond Putnam County.

"We were all so proud of her," McKelvey said. "Joining the Army was her chance to become a woman and prove herself."

She took a husband with her. Tim Bailey met Erica through her mom, Doria Alecksen. He went to a party at the Alecksen home, saw his co-worker's only daughter and was smitten.

After that first meeting, "I never went a day without seeing her," said Bailey, 23.

On Feb. 26, 2010, they were married. A month later, she joined the Army. After basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., Erica transferred to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. Bailey followed, finding work with a landscaping crew.

Those were happy times. Bailey recalled an afternoon when he picked up his wife at her shift's end. From a distance, he could see the kitten tucked under her arm.

An older woman who lived near the base discovered the little creature in her garage, Erica told her husband. Not knowing what to do, the woman called the police — the MPs on base — and an officer dispatched Erica. The rookie cop acted decisively: She adopted the kitten and named it Peaches. Case closed.

"With her," he said, "I never had a bad time."

In February, she shipped off to Afghanistan for a nine-month deployment as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. Erica called home nearly every day.

"You could hear happiness in her voice," Doria Alecksen said. In one call, her firstborn cheerfully recounted how soldiers blew up an IED they discovered. "I said, 'There are some things a daughter doesn't have to tell me until she gets home.'"





She was a daughter of the wood and field, a country girl. When she was 8, Erica caught a small rattlesnake and showed it to her horrified mom. “I just reached in and pinched it behind the head so it couldn’t bite me,” she announced. At 10, Erica spirited tents, tarps and a cooler away to the far side of the family pond where she and brother Charles, 5 at the time, set up “base camp.” It was their makeshift home for the better part of the summer. When she was 16, Erica spent a week sleeping in a doghouse to make sure Angel, the family pooch, didn’t roll over on her newly born litter.



And, from one summer to the next, Erica often went to bed wearing a swimsuit. Why waste time changing clothes in the morning when you can be pond-ready the moment your feet hit the floor?

“She was always smiling, always happy-go-lucky,” said Haleigh Gunter, Putnam High Class of 2010.

She was a daddy’s girl, Lars Alecksen said. When she was 10, he popped open the hood of an ’87 Chevy El Camino to show his daughter its engine. Atop the V-8 was an air filter cover, held in place by a wingnut. “This is No. 1,” he said. Alecksen unscrewed the wingnut as the little girl watched.

They repeated the process about 300 times, taking apart the engine and making notes to ensure they rebuilt it properly. When it was finished, Alecksen knew he had a partner: They’d go on to restore other cars, to attend auto shows. One family photo shows Erica with a hand across her husband’s shoulder; her fingertips are black with grease.

Her father encouraged her to join the Army. Learn a skill. See the world. Then he found out what part of the world she would see.

“I thought, ‘Lord God, what have I done?’” Alecksen said.

Her service to her country is done. Erica’s remains arrived before daylight Thursday at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Family members watched as solemn soldiers removed the flag-covered coffin from a truck. A chaplain comforted them at 3 a.m.

