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## Marine readied himself to fight

By Robert Sanchez and James Fuller Daily Herald Staff Writers

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Nick Larson devoted nearly all of his teen years to one goal: becoming a soldier.

"He didn't want to be a cop or a fireman or anything like that," neighbor Mick Wasserman said. "He was determined to be a Marine."

Since he was 14, Larson could be seen running through his Wheaton neighborhood or lifting weights to physically prepare himself for the rigors of boot camp.

And when the war in Iraq broke out during his final year at Wheaton North High School, he was ready, willing and maybe even eager to fight.

In fact, Larson told friends he was worried the war would be finished by the time he got there.

The tragedy for Larson's family and friends is that the fighting wasn't over. The 19-year-old was killed this week in the biggest military offensive in the Iraq war since Baghdad fell.

"He knew about the problems over there," said Herb Wehling, a longtime friend of the Larson family. "And he knew what the risks were.

"Still, he wanted to be there," Wehling said. "He is a hero."

Larson was one of three Marines who died in combat during a Tuesday assault on the insurgent stronghold in Fallujah, Iraq, military officials said.

U.S. Department of Defense officials announced Larson's death on Thursday. But the mourning started more than 24 hours earlier.

Neighbors say three Marines personally notified the Larson family about 3:30 a.m. Wednesday. David Larson shared the tragic news about his son's death with Wehling several hours later.

"He said, 'Nick...,' and I knew exactly what he was going to say next," a noticeably upset Wehling recalled. "I knew what happened. I could see it on his face."

At the Larson house Thursday, Nick's grandfather, Patrick O'Sullivan, relived the last communication he had with his grandson just a week ago.

The two shared a bond that only veterans have. O'Sullivan served in World War II.

He sent Nick an e-mail congratulating him on his promotion to lance corporal and asked him how things were going. O'Sullivan learned Larson was stationed just outside Fallujah, waiting for orders to head in.

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"We all knew they were going in eventually," O'Sullivan said. "I just ended like I always did when I talked to him: 'Take care, and stay safe.'æ"

The family has not made funeral arrangements yet. They don't expect to receive Larson's remains until next week.

Classmates at his alma mater, Wheaton North, shared a moment of silence in tribute to the fallen Marine after words from friend Christian Defee.

"He had a heart I would die for," Defee said of Larson. "When I talked to him while he was over there, he was always more concerned with how I was doing than what was going on. He had so much to live for, but then again, he was fulfilling his dream.

"Nick, you're gone, but not forgotten."

Tom Mouhelis, a Wheaton VFW Post 2164 member, said Larson was on the minds of everyone attending Veterans Day service at Memorial Park. David Larson, who served in the Navy, is a member of the post.

"It's like losing one of our own," Mouhelis said. "He was an outstanding young man."

Mouhelis, a Wheaton city council member, said there's already talk of putting some type of memorial in the park near Larson's home.

A Marine presented Wheaton North with a plaque in memory of Larson's sacrifice that will hang in the school office.

"Semper fidelis, brother," said the staff sergeant while looking at the plaque.

In the meantime, Mick Wasserman thinks of a letter he wrote to Nick Larson but never got a chance to mail.

It recalled of how Nick, a dog lover, would walk Wasserman's dog, a border collie. The letter included a picture of such a dog.

Instead, Wasserman said, he'll give the letter to the family, in a final tribute to Nick.

Marine: Plans already in works to erect memorial

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