

CSM Haller: He volunteered to fight for freedom in Iraq

By Sgt. Jim Greenhill
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ARLINGTON, Va. – Maryland Army National Guard Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Haller died in Iraq on Jan. 20.

Haller, 49, of Davidsonville, Md., was among 10 National Guard and two active Army Soldiers killed in the crash of a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter near Al Jadidah, northeast of Baghdad.

The commandant of the noncommissioned officer academy at the 70th Regiment, Regional Training Institute, at Camp Fretterd, near Reisterstown, Md., Haller served in both Afghanistan and Iraq. He had more than 25 years of military service, 24 of them in the Maryland National Guard.

Haller had chosen between two different Middle East tours, deploying last Thanksgiving so he would be home for his youngest daughter's high school graduation this summer.

"It is with an extremely heavy heart that I share the news of the death of one of Maryland's finest," Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley said in an official statement. "This tragedy underscores the debt of gratitude we owe our men and women in uniform and in particular, their families."

He was accorded full military honors at his funeral at Sailwinds Park in Cambridge, Md., on Jan. 31 at 1 p.m.

The crash claimed the largest number of Guardmembers to die in a single combat incident since at least the Korean War (1950-53), National Guard Bureau (NGB) officials said.

"Words cannot adequately express the sadness that we in the Maryland National Guard family feel today," said Maj. Gen. Bruce Tuxill, the state's adjutant general. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the sergeant major's family in their time of grief."

Haller was a member of an NGB liaison officer (LNO) team.

"Like any other American out there, he wanted to go over there," Morgan Haller, his oldest daughter, told *The Washington Post*. "You sign up for the military because it's your job. You're fighting for freedom. He wanted to be a part of it."

Two other members of the LNO team also died in the crash. They were Col. Paul Kelly, 45, from Virginia, the team's commander, and Sgt. 1st Class Floyd Lake, 43, from the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"I am deeply saddened by the loss of these outstanding National Guard Soldiers and warriors," said LTG H Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau. "I cherish their service, honor their sacrifice and mourn with their families. These National Guard Soldiers were bearers of the torch of freedom carried from one generation of Americans to the next since 1636. We will remember them in honor and gratitude."

The LNO team was conducting a liaison mission with National Guard Affairs, Multi-National Corps – Iraq. The Black Hawk was returning to Baghdad after site visits.

The Army National Guard Readiness Center in Arlington, Va., was a community “buttressed between pride and grief,” Lt. Gen. Clyde Vaughn, director of the Army National Guard, wrote in a Jan. 24 letter to the National Guard family.

“They were our family,” Vaughn said. “They were the leaders that guided us as a team, the mentors who grew us as Soldiers, the friends we shared our lives with and the smiling faces we still see so clearly in the halls.”

Haller’s survivors include his son, Sgt. Daniel Haller, who is also a veteran of both Afghanistan and Iraq, and daughters Morgan Haller and Kathryn Haller, both of Cambridge, Md. His ex-wife and the mother of his three children is Sandy Hockman, of Cambridge, Md. His mother and sister also survive him.

“He just thought it was important to have people fight for the freedoms that we take for granted,” Hockman told *The Baltimore Sun*. “There are some people who would say: ‘There’s no way I can do that.’ Roger was another kind of person. He would say: ‘Sign me up, I’m the guy.’ ”

“I don’t want him to be just another casualty statistic,” retired Command Sgt. Maj. Kathleen Hurley, a longtime friend of Haller’s, told *Newsweek*, which made the helicopter crash and the Soldiers who died the cover story for its Feb. 5 edition. “He was so much more.”

Newsweek noted the sacrifice made by Army National Guard Citizen-Soldiers as part of U.S. efforts since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks – attacks that inspired Haller to lobby to serve in theater. A former construction worker and master plumber, Haller begged to be sent overseas for the Guard, one of his daughters told the *Baltimore Examiner*.

When the orders came to go to Afghanistan last Thanksgiving, “He was so excited,” Morgan Haller said. “He still asked us if it was OK. I said, ‘It’s something you love. I’m not going to tell you no. We knew what the consequences were. When you grow up in a military life, you know those things can happen, and you’re better prepared for it than most people.’ ”

Haller rode Harley-Davidson motorcycles, loved traveling and taught his children to hunt and fish. He was their Little League coach.

National Guard LNO teams serve in Afghanistan and Iraq and are assigned to Operation Jump Start, the Guard’s support for the U.S. Border Patrol along this country’s border with Mexico, among other places and operations.

Team members tell ground component commanders how the NGB can support the war fight, and they tell the NGB and Lt. Gen. Vaughn about anticipated requirements. Liaison officers also inform the Army National Guard director about the needs, welfare, equipment issues and morale of Citizen-Soldiers and coordinate site visits.

“Every task this team handled, every mission they entered into was to ensure our National Guard personnel could effectively fight for a fledgling freedom in a land few would dare to enter,” Vaughn said.

The Citizen-Soldiers were flying in an Alabama Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter assigned to the 36th Combat Aviation Brigade with the Texas Army National Guard. The helicopter was returning to Camp Victory, Baghdad, after a site visit and flying in formation before the crash, NGB officials said.

A quick reaction force arrived at the crash site in three minutes, secured the area and reported no survivors, the American Forces Information Service reported. The lead helicopter landed after the crash to see if anyone could be saved, AFIS reported.

Haller graduated from Cambridge Senior High School in 1975 and held degrees in history and political science from Fairmont State College in West Virginia. An infantryman, he enlisted in the Virginia Army National Guard in 1981. He was also trained in other military occupational specialties.

He was the youngest of five children, and it was the World War II service of his father and his uncle in the Pacific Theater that inspired his military service, the *Sun* reported.

Through Jan. 19, 443 National Guard Citizen-Soldiers and Airmen died in the Global War on Terrorism. Almost 200,000 Army Guard Citizen-Soldiers wear combat patches on their right sleeve designating service in Afghanistan or Iraq.

The crash remained under investigation Jan. 29.

- Master Sgt. Bob Haskell contributed to this report.