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**Vietnam, Iraq wars cited for minister's suicide**

**He wrote that the latest conflict brought back unbearable horrors**

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**By MIKE LEWIS**

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

WENATCHEE -- He never was inclined to talk much about the damage, at least not to his wife and children. They knew -- it was obvious -- that a land mine in Vietnam took large portions of both of the Rev. Alan McLean's legs 38 years ago.

They knew that the single detonation in 1967 triggered ongoing waves of psychological temblors when McLean heard helicopters or when war footage appeared on the news. They knew that the decorated veteran was profoundly distressed by the Iraq war, an anxiety that ran as deep as the former Marine's patriotism.

But they didn't know about the .45-caliber pistol. Or the suicide note in his laptop, written but never printed out, seven days before he used that pistol. In it, McLean, the popular rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church here, apologized to his wife, Betsy, and his children for not being stronger. The war in Iraq, he said, unbearably amplified his nightmares.



McLean

He said he'd had enough.

"35 Marines died today in Iraq, only slightly more noticed than my legs," the former second lieutenant typed on Feb. 4. "I did not get any of my Marines of Charlie (Company) killed. It is possibly a sign of God's presence there. Certainly not of my ability."

With his final decision to call 911 from his church office and turn his pistol to his chest on Feb. 11, McLean, 62, became a casualty of two wars, his family members said.

"I underestimated the power of the war to take his life," said his daughter, Mary Watkins, 29, of Tacoma. "And I really feel that though my dad's been in Wenatchee, the war in Iraq killed him."

Betsy McLean, Alan's widow, agreed.

"That is why he killed himself," she said while sitting in the family home as relatives, friends and visitors drifted in and out. "Noticeably, it had become a burden, the frustration about what was being said. He was anxious about the soldiers coming home."

McLean discovered he first wanted to be a soldier while working on his undergraduate degree at Harvard. Some friends had enlisted. He felt a responsibility to serve, Betsy said.

In 1966, the collegiate rugby player picked the Marine Corps, completed his degree and went into basic training.

He was commissioned a second lieutenant and was sent to Vietnam. He had been there one month when he stepped on the mine.

As a result, he was awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. After five months of surgeries and rehabilitation -- his right leg was amputated above the knee; his left, below -- McLean was out of the service and back in Cambridge, Mass.

On crutches and at a party, he began chatting with the other person in the room also on crutches. "I had broken my leg," recalled Betsy. "He asked if I wanted to sit down. He said he needed to."

Betsy kidded him about needing to sit. After all, she didn't. He said in a matter-of-fact way, "Well, I lost my legs."

Betsy, who couldn't see past the khakis to the prosthetics, said "Oh, sure," and chuckled. Then he lifted a pants leg and showed her. She smiled at the memory.

"He was right."

The pair later married and moved to Palo Alto, Calif., where McLean earned a master's degree in business from Stanford University. In 1969, the Pillsbury Corp. hired him for its finance department, and by the fall of 1970 the pair had moved to Paris, where they would live for five years as McLean climbed through corporate ranks.

Every year, Betsy said, he would bring up the notion of becoming an Episcopal priest. Every year, something would get in the way.

"It took him a while to get that collar turned around," she said.

In the fall of 1985, he entered the seminary. He never looked back.

"He loved his new life in the church," she said.

After graduating from the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis in 1990 at 42, he eventually ended up as a pastor, first in Pine Bluff, Ark., and then Forest, Va., before coming to St. Luke's two years ago. In all three places, he made disabled access to the church a priority.

But stress disorder episodes dogged him.

The first Gulf War left him nearly debilitated, his daughter said. Panic attacks followed the *whup-whup-whup* of a helicopter. War footage, especially about ground wars, left him shaken. Over the years, the reactions worsened.

"It got worse and worse," Betsy said. "We stopped watching the news."

Unexpectedly, in the past couple of years he began to talk more about his experiences, Watkins said. He told his daughter about the mine, about how he was upended by the blast.

In recent weeks, they chatted about the war in Iraq.

"It's funny. I assess people for suicides every day at work," said Watkins, who is a behavioral-health specialist for Pierce County. "Looking at what my dad had been doing with his life I would not have assessed him as suicidal."

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder experts say the condition comes from a single event or a series of events such as involvement in a war, natural disasters, sexual or physical abuse, or any life-threatening trauma. The stress reaction can cause nightmares, memory problems, feeling of imminent threat and continual reliving of the event, among other things.

Once called shell shock or combat fatigue, the disorder can be minor and disappear in months. Or they can last for years, sometimes worsening.

Noted a war veteran who attended a memorial service for McLean and asked that his name not be used: "Many of us go through it in one way or another. Some of us (veterans) never really get over it."

Six months after the Iraq war began, McLean gave a sermon about having faith in what the government was doing. His family and friends noticed the war began to have an increasingly heavy effect on the rector.

Half a year later, he offered a different view, one that divided parishioners in the conservative farming town. He told the congregation he was no longer sure the country was doing the right thing.

"Some people were upset with him," Betsy said. "But he was not unpatriotic by saying that. He was deeply patriotic. He supported the troops, just not the war."

McLean is survived by two other children: a son, Robb McLean of Albuquerque, N.M.; and a daughter, Margaret Kennedy of Olympia.

In a memorial service Saturday -- 38 years to the day that McLean was wounded -- Spokane Bishop James Waggoner Jr. said what his friend suffered from was "the human condition" of what people can do and what they can endure.

"He was a casualty of Vietnam," Waggoner told the crowd of several hundred gathered at St. Luke's. "After 38 years the horror never left him. He lived with it, and he died with it."

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