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Vets give photograph to family of Marine

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an unmistakable figure propped up in a hospital bed. It was the hulking, 6-foot-4 frame of U.S. Marine Martin Owens, a childhood friend who was being treated at the hospital for an infection in his arm.

Owens was the first friend from home Chandler met in that dark place halfway across the world, but he wasn't the last. Within days another childhood friend, U.S. Army soldier Tommy Peagler, arrived with hepatitis.

"We all went three separate directions, three different branches of the military, and we wind up all back together again in Vietnam," Chandler said. "As big as that country is, to end up in that rinky-dink hospital in the middle of nowhere was really strange."

For several weeks, the three reminisced about growing up less than a mile from each other and going to Hanahan High School.

Owens was the first to recover and rejoin his unit. Three weeks later, Chandler received a letter from his mother telling him that Owens, just 21, had died from a sniper's bullet days after he was discharged from the hospital.

On Thursday, 39 years after Owens' death, his sister's cozy Hanahan home was the site of another unlikely reunion.

Peagler and Chandler presented Owens' sister, Melinda Toppin, and his mother, Ursula Baker, with a large military photograph of Owens that Peagler recently found propped on the floor of the Charleston Vet Center on Rivers Avenue. The family had never seen the photograph.



TYRONE WALKER/STAFF

Sitting beside her daughter Eva Maria and holding her grandchild, Ginger Morales wipes away tears as she talks Thursday about her Hanahan High School classmates Martin Owens and Johnny Ray Triplett, two men who lost their lives decades ago in Vietnam.

"It just gives me shivery feelings all the way through to think that you would do this," Baker told the men. "It's just so wonderful to be with people who have known him. If I cry for the rest of the afternoon, it's still worth it."

Where the photograph has been all these years is still a bit of a mystery. Peagler said he was told that Owens' photo and that of another childhood friend who died in the war, Johnny Ray Triplett, had been locked away in an attic of a building that was being demolished. Someone took the two military photographs to the veterans center hoping someone knew the men pictured. Peagler said he instantly recognized both men and called Chandler.

They are still trying to locate Triplett's family to give them the photo of their son, who was 18 when he died in a helicopter crash.

"They didn't need to be in no closet," Peagler said of the photographs.

The photograph elicited memories, stories and tears from everyone in Toppin's living room.

"It's just like Marty to show up unexpected," Toppin said, laughing through tears.

Baker said her son wrote her all the time, to the point that she wondered where he found the time.

"I've got boxes of letters," his mother said.

Toppin, who was just 11 when her brother died, is now an English teacher at Hanahan High and is writing a book about her brother's life. She described him as a large man with even a larger heart. He would always take the most dangerous position on the battlefield so others wouldn't have to and wrote stories of how Vietnamese children were drawn to him.

"I guess I'm just the motherly type," he wrote.

Toppin said his gentle side extended to animals. "My brother would go around buying dogs so people wouldn't eat them," she said.

He was so big, one of his favorite practical jokes was to pick up cars by the back fender while people attempted to drive off.

"He hasn't been forgotten," Chandler told his mother and

sister. "He was a special guy. You could not not like Marty."

Chandler, 60, and Peagler, 59, returned from the war disabled with a series of ailments. Chandler said he normally doesn't talk about his 13 months at the hospital to people who didn't go through it.

"This is one of the few times I have ever opened up," Chandler said. "My kids have asked me things I've never answered. There's just some things you don't talk about."

Chandler said he's never stopped thinking about Owens. He keeps a 39-year-old Hanahan News article about their first reunion in his back pocket.

He places a flag at Owens' grave site at Carolina Memorial Cemetery in North Charleston every time he visits the area from his home in Myrtle Beach.

Thursday was no different. When they finished meeting with his family, Peagler and Chandler drove to the cemetery for another reunion with their fallen friend.

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Attorneys: Hynie may be Brown's legal wife

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well have had the ability to contract into marriage and may be legally married to James Brown," Augusta attorney Martin Puetz said Wednesday without having seen the final verdict.

Brown's longtime attorney Buddy Dallas disagreed Tuesday. Calling Hynie an "estranged girlfriend," Dallas said Hynie's 1997 marriage negated her union with Brown.

The day of Brown's death, Dallas ordered the gates to the singer's \$422,000 Beech Island home padlocked, denying Hynie access.

A phone message left for Dallas at his Thomson office and a page sent to his mobile phone were not immediately returned Thursday.

Hynie's lawyer, Charleston attorney Robert Rosen, also couldn't be reached. His office said he was out of the country until January and that nobody else was available to comment on the case. It was unclear why the paperwork was filed in Charleston, rather than closer to Hynie's home in the Augusta area.

The Charleston court document referred to Hynie's first husband, Javed Ahmed, as a Pakistani immigrant who had three or more other wives at the time he married Hynie in Houston.

In light of Ahmed's previous marriages, Dallas' position might actually favor Hynie, Creson said. "An unresolved prior marriage is a bar to a subsequent marriage," he said. "If he (Ahmed) was married before, he could not contract to marry her; therefore, she has no prior marriage. So, there's no bar when she married James."

Segars-Andrews dissolved the union of Hynie and Ahmed, citing his previous marriages and the fact that the marriage was not consummated. She also ruled that Ahmed

married Hynie to fraudulently obtain U.S. citizenship, according to court records.

Phone messages left for Segars-Andrews at her office and her Mount Pleasant home weren't immediately returned Thursday.

A South Carolina marriage requires both the ability to marry and the intent to marry, Puetz said. An existing marriage eliminates someone's legal ability to marry again, Puetz said.

But if a judge ruled that marriage never existed, then there should be no impediment to the legality of the second marriage, Creson said. "Once that defect drops out, that marriage becomes valid," he said Wednesday.

The same year she married and left Ahmed, Hynie said she moved in with Brown at his 62-acre estate.

Aiken County court records show the couple wed on Dec. 14, 2001, in Beech Island. That same year, she gave birth to their son, James. On Thursday, Hynie was in New York for a memorial service in Brown's honor at the Apollo Theater. She asked not to be disturbed.

North Augusta lawyer Jim Huff represented Brown when he sought an annulment from Hynie in 2005, he said. Brown dismissed the proceeding later that year, he said.

Like Dallas, Huff said he thinks Hynie's first marriage makes her marriage to Brown invalid.

"Then why did they file (for an annulment)?" asked Creson. "Somebody thought there was a problem there."

Hynie pledged Tuesday to fight her battle in court.

Donnie Fetter writes for The Augusta Chronicle. **Sandi Martin** of the Chronicle and **Noah Haglund** of The Post and Courier contributed to this story.



TYRONE WALKER/STAFF

Air Force Capt. Nathan Phillips of the 15th Airlift Squadron takes a moment with his daughter in the Charleston Air Force Base passenger terminal before leaving Thursday.

Airmen on four-month deployment to Mideast

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wouldn't miss his baby's first picture.

That's when the Newberrys found out they were having a boy.

"We got a clear shot," Jesse Newberry said. "The doctor said it was pretty obvious."

Newberry said he expects to make it home before the birth of his son, but several airmen who left Thursday will miss out on baby milestones and come home to infants and young children who likely won't remember them.

Capt. Nathan Phillips, a C-17 pilot videotaped himself reading books such as "How Much Do I Love You?" for his child. His wife Kathy will play the videos for their

4-month-old daughter Elizabeth to keep recollections fresh.

"She recognizes his face in pictures," Kathy Phillips said. "She knows his voice, too."

Elizabeth Phillips will keep her mother busy, but not so busy that Kathy Phillips won't worry about the areas her husband will fly into.

The squadron operates cargo planes, sometimes evacuating injured and sometimes dropping supplies to troops under fire.

Phillips will be one of several mothers who will share their phone calls from deployed husbands with children.

Airmen are allowed at least two 15-minute morale calls a week. And some expect to take advan-

tage of e-mail and video phones.

Shannon Shaffer said she will hold out the phone to her new son Kyle's ear so the 3-week-old can hear his daddy, 1st Lt. Kevin Shaffer, talk.

After the holiday and the birth of a baby was a sad time to go, but Shaffer said he was excited to use his training. Deploying with a squadron will give the new airman time to get to know other squadron members he will rely upon for moral support.

An additional 550 airmen from various squadrons of Charleston's 437th Airlift Wing will deploy in small groups in the coming weeks.

They will fill a variety of support positions throughout the Mideast,

but they will not leave in a group.

Sending all the airmen from the squadron instead of pieces of the group allows airmen to work with the people they know, said 1st Lt. Erick Brough, another C-17 pilot. "Everyone leans on each other," he said.

Back home, the spouses do the same.

"A lot of other babies were born at the same time," Shannon Shaffer said, looking out among the room of new parents where there are at least 20 babies of all ages.

"I have a lot of other moms to call if I need help."

Reach **Jessica Johnson** at jjohnson@postandcourier.com or 745-5860.

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