RYANN PEDONE IS RUNNING FOR ARMY CAPT. KIMBERLY N. HAMPTON

27, of Easley, S.C.; assigned to 1st Battalion, 82nd Aviation Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, N.C.; killed Jan. 2 when her OH-58 Kiowa observation helicopter was shot down by enemy ground fire in Fallujah, Iraq.

EASLEY, S.C. — A month after Army Capt. Kimberly N. Hampton's helicopter was shot down in Iraq, her death reverberates in the hill town that sent her to war.

At the elementary school across the railroad tracks, children have clipped newspaper articles about her and taped them to the wall. At the tiny Art Deco movie theater on Main Street, the marquee was lettered with her name. At the high school, and at Bob Seaborn's Body Shop, and at Buck's Drive-In, and at the Dixie Lumber Co., the signs bore one announcement -- her name.

Hampton died Jan. 2, the 492nd American soldier to die in Iraq since the beginning of the war. A few days later, a Black Hawk was shot down nearby, killing all nine soldiers aboard, and Hampton's death became a footnote in a larger story about the insurgency.

But not in this part of South Carolina.

The "lint-heads" -- textile workers -- who built Easley never had the rich soil that nourished farms or plantations, and they did not drink whiskey like their neighbors on the flat plains to the east. Instead they had preaching, and war: "In the South," reads an inscription at the county courthouse, "we have believed always in fighting."

The day of Hampton's funeral -- when children in church clothes stood on the side of the road to salute her coffin as it went by -- was about the biggest thing that had ever happened in Easley, people say.

About 1,200 mourners attended, including many of the town's veterans, who walked behind her coffin as it slowly made its way to the cemetery. Six white horses drew a caisson that held her casket. Behind it, a black horse followed, saddled but riderless, with boots reversed in its stirrups, a cavalry tradition showing that a soldier has fallen and will ride no more.

Hampton's family was grieving for a very real 27-year-old -- a radiant, self-effacing woman who as a girl fell in love with helicopters the way other girls fell in love with horses. But most of the people along the road were strangers. Some who attended said it gave them back the feeling of honor they last felt during World War II, when Easley sent its high school sports heroes off to fight the Germans and Japanese.

Mike O'Kane, a retired paratrooper who served two tours in Vietnam, called the funeral "a gut-wrenching, emotional, uplifting, traumatic experience for me."

"The good news today is that Kimberly has done her work," O'Kane said. "I'm feeling this redemption, this satisfaction that we still have youngsters like that."

Like most of the soldiers killed in this war, Hampton came from a small place -- Easley, in Pickens County, population about 18,000. An analysis of military casualties by the sociologist Robert Cushing for the Austin (Texas) American-Statesman showed that the number of war dead from counties of less than 50,000 is twice as large as the number from counties of more than 1 million.

There's a reason for that, said the military officials whom Cushing consulted: Small-town Americans are more patriotic, they live near a larger population of veterans, and they have fewer employment options facing them after high school or college.

In towns like these, the news of a young person's death affects people powerfully.

"It becomes real to a small town when you lose a well-known figure, someone who is the pride and joy of that generation of youth," said Rosemary Mariner, a retired Navy aviator and visiting scholar at the University of Tennessee's Center for the Study of War and Society. "That brings the war home."

It was that way with Hampton. People in Easley knew her name; they knew her smile and wink. They knew that her parents had been married for 12 years before they were able to have a child, and that they only had the one.

“I don’t think any parents ever wanted a child any worse than we did,” Ann Hampton said, “and I don’t think any parents loved a child any more.” Both Ann and her husband, Dale, are Easley natives.

As a first-grader, Kimberly Hampton spent so much time playing soccer against the boys that her teacher mentioned it at a parent-teacher conference. She was an unusual child, so serious. Was she the only girl playing, her mother asked, and the teacher said she was. Was it a problem? The teacher said no: It’s nice to see the boys get beat.

As a college tennis player -- she was ranked 18th nationally -- she was fiercely competitive.

“When she got beat, and that was not often, she would cry like a baby,” said Donna Arnold, 44, her tennis coach at Presbyterian College in nearby Clinton. “It just killed her.”

A charismatic leader as a student -- enrollment in ROTC at her high school exploded the year she led it -- Hampton never liked individual attention, and took to military culture naturally.

When she earned a troop command in the cavalry of the 82nd Airborne Division, she was one of perhaps two women to do so in history, her commander said.

“She was a cavalryman in her heart,” said Lt. Col. Terry Morgan. “She had earned her spurs and her Stetson.”

Flying, in particular, had always unleashed something in her spirit.

Once, Arnold, her tennis coach, planned a surprise for her star player’s birthday: The two drove to Donaldson Center Airport in Greenville, where the military had flown in helicopters from bases throughout the region. The aircraft extended in long rows: Black Hawks, Kiowas, Apaches, Chinooks. Hampton got out of the car and practically danced down the line.

“She just lit up,” Arnold said. “She was like a kid at a carnival.”

There was, local people say now, a vein of courage in Easley that must have flowed into Kimberly Hampton. Sleepy in peacetime, the town routinely awakens during war.

The Piedmont yielded little to the Scotch-Irish who settled in this part of northwest South Carolina, and they developed a reputation as fighting men, said Steve Wainscott, a professor of political science at Clemson University.

Locals say they view military service as payment for their citizenship.

"There is a spirit here that you have, that's borne out of people living in ... hill country," said Frank Cartee, 77, an Army Ranger who served in World War II. "We are a part of the first frontier, as opposed to a come-later type of thing. We are about 1,000 feet above sea level, and we feel our pleasure of being Americans.

"If and when you come home," he said, "you have paid your debt."

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Dale and Ann Hampton's daughter -- a freshly minted officer -- was swept into the war on terrorism.

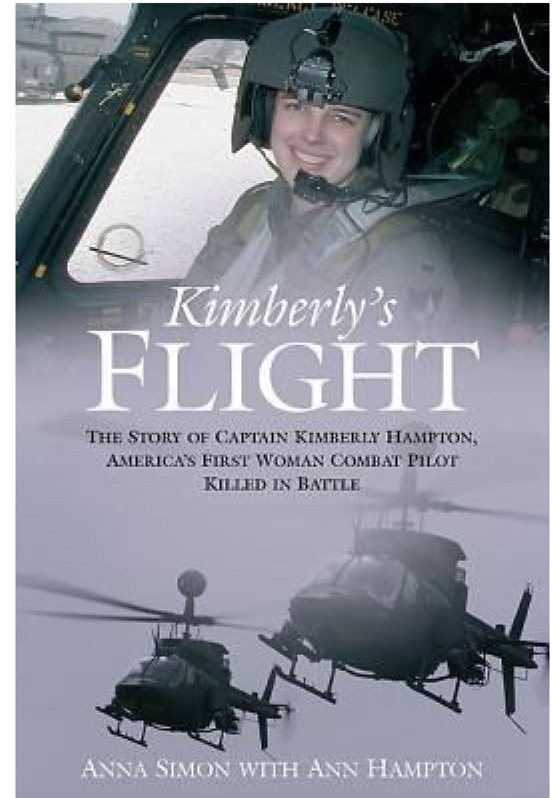
After patrolling the "no-fly" zone on the border between North and South Korea, she served at Bagram air base, the U.S. headquarters in Afghanistan, , where, Arnold said, she was frustrated because she did not fly regularly. In Iraq, she was pulled into the thick of the action in Fallouja, leading a platoon of 15 helicopters and 30 soldiers that flew in support of infantry as they carried out raids.

When she died, she was the first U.S. female pilot to be shot down in combat, according to the Women in Military Service for America Foundation. She was the first woman in the 82nd Airborne Division to die, and the first woman from South Carolina to die in this war.

"It had much more of an effect than any other death I have seen," Wainscott said.

For those closest to her, there is the numbness of enormous loss. When Ann Hampton saw her daughter off to Iraq, she told her, "I'm just going to pretend you're at summer camp." Since her death, Hampton's mother confessed, half of her still believes it.

Others find themselves raking through memories. Kelli Kirkland, 26, one of Hampton's closest friends, remembers the two of them watching the movie "Courage Under Fire," in which a female helicopter pilot was killed in battle. Kirkland began to cry.



"She was with me, and she wasn't crying," Kirkland said. "Very calmly -- she wasn't mad at me -- she said, 'This is what I'm going to do. This is the risk you have to take.' She didn't try to console me. She didn't say, 'Kelli, I'm going to be OK.' "