



"I won't let myself give in to fear," says Emma Stephens (at home on Jan. 11 with, from left, Willie, Tim and Ed).

In His Brother's Name

Twelve years after Chris Stephens died in the Gulf, Tim Stephens prepares to ship out

The midday scene in Willie and Emma Stephens's Killeen, Texas, ranch house has all the appearances of a happy family reunion. Four of the couple's children supervise as 10 boisterous grandkids, from toddlers to teens, elbow their way toward six take-out pizzas piled on the kitchen table. "These are the best times," says Willie, 67, "when we're all together."

Yet he is keenly aware of one significant absence: Son Christopher, an Army sergeant—one of four Stephens brothers who fought in 1991's Gulf

War—was killed at 27. He was one of the conflict's few U.S. casualties. Chris's memory seems particularly close at this gathering, the family's send-off for the youngest Stephens son, Tim, 37, an Army staff sergeant who expects to ship out any day from Fort Hood, bound for what could well be the next U.S. assault on Iraq. In all, the Pentagon is likely to dispatch at least 250,000 U.S. troops to the region, but for Tim, it's a personal affair. "If we remove Saddam from power," he says, "it will give me some kind of relief

knowing that Chris didn't die in vain."

Tim was at an air base in Kuwait in February 1991 when he spoke by phone with his wife, Sharon, who then told him the news that Chris's Bradley Fighting Vehicle had taken fatal fire three days earlier. Devastated, he thought almost immediately of a farewell videotape Chris had made just three months earlier, before the pair of them—along with brothers Ed and Will—headed off to Operation Desert Storm. "In case something does happen," Chris had said to the cam-



"I still have my moments when it's hard," Emma (in 1991) says of son Chris, who died in the Gulf War.



Brother Ed says Chris (in 1991) "was the family funny guy."

era, "I don't want you to grieve too hard for me, because life goes on."

But getting on with life proved difficult for the Stephens clan. For a time, Emma, now 62, would smash dishes in the backyard to vent her anger, which became even more acute when an investigation revealed that Chris's death had resulted from a friendly-fire incident. (The crew of a U.S. tank had become disoriented in the dark.) At first she kept her distance from her children, particularly those in the military, out of what she now calls a subconscious fear. "But I got past that," she says, "and realized I wanted to spend as much time with them as possible."

Sister Drue, 38, visited Chris's grave weekly and almost obsessively replayed his farewell video. "I cope now through medication," says Drue, who in 1991 suffered a nervous breakdown, "and prayer. It's still hard for me to deal with."

Brothers Ed, 43, and Will, 42, stuck with their Army careers until they retired—Ed in 2000 for a security career and Will in 2002, hoping to find a job

in communications. (Another brother, Michael, 41, has been in prison since 1991 on a narcotics charge.) But it is Tim, a military transportation specialist, who will now have to face the prospect of battle alone. "I didn't have second thoughts about staying in the Army," he says. "I wanted to be

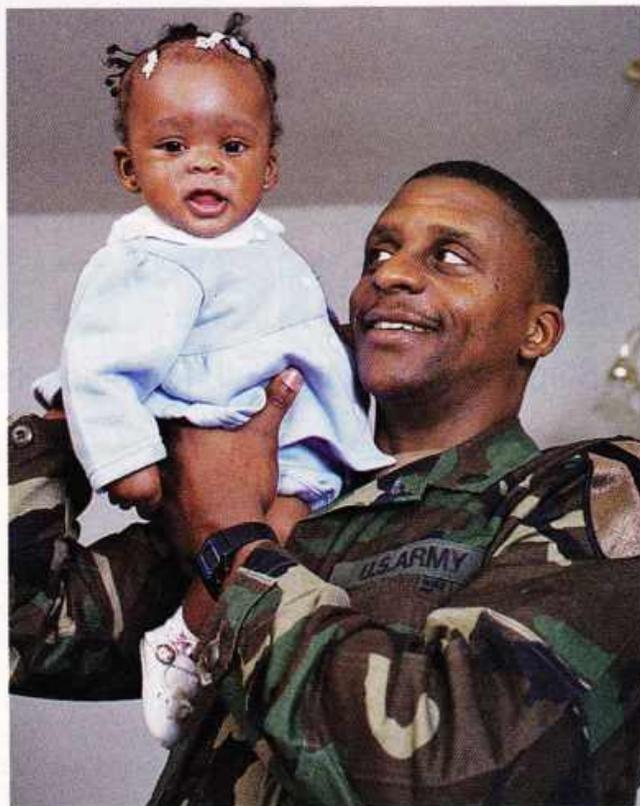
part of history by defending Americans' freedoms and our nation's way of life."

That singlemindedness set in early when Tim, at 15, set his sights on joining up. "Tim's a perfect fit for the Army," says his mother. "He understands what his job is and doesn't question." He enlisted in 1984 and two years later while stationed in Louisiana met Army supply clerk Sharon Monroe, now 38, whom he wed in 1987. They eventually settled near Tim's base at Fort Hood, where Sharon stays busy with Christopher, 4, and Katina, 5 months. (Tim also has a son, Timothy, 17, from a previous relationship.) Though Sharon, all too aware of her brother-in-law's fate, harbors her own fears, she tries to keep them from Tim. "He doesn't want to see me break down," she says, "and have to worry about me when he's over there."

For her part, Emma—who divorced Willie in 1984 but remarried him in 2001—tries not to worry about Tim, with whom she shares a close bond. During Desert Storm, she recalls, he would routinely find pay phones and call her collect. This time, she's trying to think positive thoughts. "If Tim has any fear, it's well hidden," she says. "So the least I can do is to hide mine too."

Yet no one in the family can hide the pain each of them still feels for Chris, whose widow, Jennie Stephens, a Houston hairstylist and the mother of their four children (Chris had a fifth child from a previous relationship), has never remarried and chose not to talk for this story. "Chris's presence is all around us," says Willie, "and I have no doubt that he'll be with Tim over there."

- Thomas Fields-Meyer
- Anne Lang in Killeen



"Physically, I'm ready to go," says Tim (with daughter Katina). "Mentally, I don't like leaving my family here without me."