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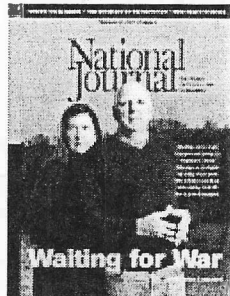
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MILITARY FAMILIES PREPARE FOR WAR



The American military family, so little connected to the Establishment, will do the most and lose the most if the United States attacks Iraq. **National Journal** reports on the hopes, fears and mixed emotions of one family preparing to send a son to war. [National Journal](#)

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DEFENSE

Waiting For War

By George C. Wilson, *National Journal*
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 Friday, Feb. 21, 2003

Remembering how the Viet Cong soldier in the floppy hat and black pajamas came at him with an AK-47 rifle makes it hard for **Phillip John Hall** to convince himself that his Army platoon-leader son will come out of Iraq all right.

Few Americans who would be in harm's way in Iraq come from America's ruling class. They have parents like Phil and Barbara Hall -- parents who wonder whether war is justified.

Hall shares the anxiety of millions of Americans waiting to hear whether **President Bush** has sent their sons, daughters, husband, wives or other relatives to the first pre-emptive war ever waged by the United States. If he decides to attack Iraq, Bush will order to the Middle East about 200,000 active-duty personnel and another 200,000 reservists.

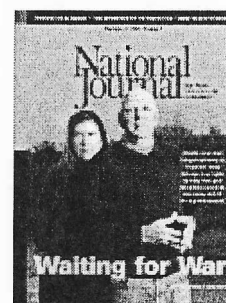
Few of the men and women who would be in harm's way come from America's Establishment class -- the class that runs things. Only 10 senators and 30 representatives in the current Congress have ever been in military combat, according to the Military Officers Association of America. Neither President Bush nor **Vice President Cheney** has been in the active-duty military. And few in Congress have sons or daughters in the enlisted ranks of the Army, Navy, Air

Force or Marine Corps.

The American military family, so little connected to the Establishment, will do the most and lose the most if war comes. And for many members of that family, the agonizing wait is marked by constant apprehension, hopes and fears about government leaders, and bitter memories of Vietnam.

Phil and **Barbara Hall** live in Shady Shores, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. Phil is a retired maintenance chief and Barbara is a financial manager for a Dallas food wholesaler. Their two sons are in the Army; they expect one to be deployed to the Middle East any moment. The Halls' daughter attended West Point for three semesters before deciding the military life was not for her.

Like thousands of other fathers in America's military family, Phil Hall, 57, fought in Vietnam. He knows firsthand that government leaders can lie about war. Barbara Hall, 49, was in high school during part of the Vietnam War but felt its impact because of classmates who went off to fight in it. A fervent student of history, she cites Vietnam as proof that those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. Day by day, Phil and Barbara Hall listen to and parse what the president and administration officials are



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saying about the need to fight this new war.

Do the Halls believe that the United States must invade and disarm Iraq, knowing this almost certainly would put their youngest child, commander of an anti-armor platoon, at the point of America's spear?

"I don't think there's going to be the falsehoods surrounding it," Phil Hall said, comparing the present government's case against Iraq with the case made against North Vietnam in the 1960s. "I think we're a more straight-up nation today."

"We're one war smarter," interjected Barbara Hall.

"I trust **Colin Powell**," Phil Hall said of the secretary of State, the only Vietnam combat veteran among top policy makers on Iraq. "I trust his word more than President Bush's word. Don't get me wrong. I think President Bush is an honorable person. But I don't think he has the depth that Colin Powell has. I really trust Colin Powell's judgment. I don't think Colin Powell would be buying into it if this wasn't right.

"The class is still out on (Defense Secretary **Donald**) **Rumsfeld**. He reminds me a little bit of (former Defense Secretary **Robert S.**) **McNamara**," who ran the Pentagon during the Vietnam War. "That worries me some. We foot soldiers had to pay for his mistakes in Vietnam."

Barbara Hall shares her husband's qualms about Rumsfeld: "I sense an arrogance there. That scares me. He seems to be the type that is going to overestimate his abilities and underestimate his adversaries. That's where you get into trouble. So we would be paying the bill, wherever he fell short on abilities. Our son would personally be paying the bill."

She remembers with sadness and anger the price paid by her classmates who fought in Vietnam. "To me, it was just something that never, ever, ever should have happened. To me, it's entirely the result of England needing a spoil of war to give France from World War II, rather than granting Vietnam the independence that it had rightfully earned. The result of one war leads to another. Actually, if we had studied our history at the end of World War II, Vietnam probably never would have occurred. We should spend more time on history. I like to think it's a good thing to learn by your own mistakes, but infinitely preferable to learn by someone else's. And history lets you do that.

"If we had understood the nature of the problem before we went into Vietnam, if we had understood **Ho Chi Minh**, if we had understood everything about the situation rather than what a handful of politicians told us, people would have been more reluctant to accept the government's argument that we had to go into Vietnam."

Does Iraq pose a serious enough threat to the United States to justify going to war? Phil and Barbara Hall, members of the traditionally supportive military family, both want the government to tell them more.

"It's hard to say whether they are a direct threat or not," Barbara said of the Iraqis. "If they really, truly are supporting Al Qaeda, they absolutely are a direct threat now. You have to have a level of trust in your president. We have to assume there are things that they cannot tell us.

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"But it's different if you have a child in the service. Before the kids were active-duty, we would have pretty much blindly trusted whatever (the government leaders) say. Now we're not quite as comfortable. We'd like more reassurance. But we still understand that there are things they cannot tell us. I think something needs to be done. I would prefer the United Nations getting behind it and really pushing it."

Bush's go/no-go decision, whichever it is, cannot be called good or bad, this mother of two infantry officers said. "It's just a hard decision. I think it's another one of those questions that has two right answers and two wrong answers. Only hindsight is going to be able to tell us for sure."

The tough question -- the one anyone would like to avoid asking, but the one that is constantly on the minds of Phil and Barbara Hall and everyone else in the military family -- was asked. If your son -- if Lt. **Matthew Hall**, 24, commander of 4th Anti-Armor Platoon, Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), an outfit that is already moving to Iraq's borders -- should be hurt or lost in an Iraq war, would it have been for a worthwhile and just cause? Barbara Hall answers first. Quickly. Without tearing up, but with a catch in her throat.

"You can't ever justify a loss like that. You can't. It's a matter of, 'Is there blame to be put, or not?' And I don't know that there would be blame to be put. But you can never justify a loss like that."

Phil Hall, an old trooper who was one of the few in his rifle company to survive a fierce firefight in Vietnam, knows his Army sons are smart and would be careful with their men and themselves in any battle. And he agrees with his wife. But he also knows that luck can outweigh blame on the battlefield.

"There's a lot you can do to stay alive, but there's also a lot you can't control. If you're walking along and the sniper puts his sights on you, there's nothing you did wrong. If he misses and you give him a second chance, then you did something wrong. If a mortar shell lands right on top of you, there's nothing you did wrong. So I realize, very much so, the implications of what can happen. Needless to say, my life would be shattered if I lost one of the kids over there, but I also think we can't shy away from our responsibilities as a nation. We are a world leader. If we shy away from these kinds of events, our enemies will take advantage of it."

'I Owe It to the Country'

No outside pressures pushed Phil and Barbara Hall and their three children into the American military family. Growing up in blue-collar households, neither member of this couple had portraits of blood-related generals or admirals hanging on the walls of their homes, as is the case with so many traditional military families.

"I thought I owed it to the country to go," said Phil Hall of his August 1964 decision to quit his \$56.90-a-week job bagging and loading fertilizer to join the Army as a private. He believed **President Johnson** and Secretary of State **Dean Rusk** when they said that the United States had to keep North Vietnam's Communists from taking over South Vietnam. Otherwise, the rest of Asia would fall to the commies like dominos. "If Vietnam falls, you can kiss Thailand goodbye," Rusk used to say.

"I didn't have to go," Hall recalled. "Nobody around home was getting drafted back then. I went to Waukesha and signed up for three years."

Less than two years later, on April 11, 1966, the husky, 6-foot-tall, 21-year-old Pfc. Hall was picking his way through the South Vietnamese jungle 40 miles east of Saigon near the village of Xa Cam My. He was carrying four belts of M-60 machine-gun ammunition and a 12-gauge pump shotgun (his Army buddies called him "The Mule" because of all the heavy stuff he could carry for miles). Maj. Gen.

William E. DePuy, the aggressive commander of the 1st Infantry Division, had ordered Hall's Charlie Company to march deep into the jungle. DePuy was using Charlie Company as bait to catch a bigger quarry. He figured the elusive D-800 Battalion of 400 to 600 seasoned Viet Cong fighters would attack the isolated 134-man American company; not only would the Viet Cong enjoy a numerical advantage, they would have thick protective trees overhead to preclude U.S. bombing or strafing. Once D-800 attacked, DePuy planned to rush in another rifle company and destroy the crack, heavily armed Viet Cong battalion.

DePuy miscalculated. He failed to realize that no rescue force could hack through the thick underbrush quickly enough to save Charlie Company, especially at night.

Hall, an experienced hunter and woodsman who in the forests back home could spot a deer in the trees or a turkey in a clearing from hundreds of yards away, took a break from slashing away at the underbrush. He sat in a clump of bushes on the jungle floor, shotgun in his lap, and scanned every tree and bush. He saw 12 Viet Cong flitting from tree to tree. Some wore the black pajamas of peasant riflemen; others the dreaded khaki of experienced officers. Charlie Company had run into D-800, all right.

"Lieutenant!" Hall yelled to **Johnny Libs**, his platoon leader, "I got people out here with khaki uniforms on!" The Viet Cong officers appeared to be directing an encirclement of the isolated American force. Viet Cong fired from the trees and bushes to the spot where the American voice had come from. Hall lay flat on the jungle floor. He heard someone nearby. He raised his head. He saw a Viet Cong trooper, with a floppy hat and an AK-47 rifle, walking toward him to make sure he was dead. Hall jumped up, aimed his shotgun at the soldier's chest, and kept pulling the trigger and pumping the loader until his attacker fell back dead.

"Withdraw!" 2nd platoon leader Libs shouted to Hall. "Get back in here inside the perimeter."

Hall made a run for it. Viet Cong bullets hit all around him as he sprinted. He dove behind an anthill inside the perimeter. He was safe. But only for the moment. He helped Spc. 4 **John Noyce** set up and fire the M-60 machine gun, but their steady fire failed to repel the advancing Viet Cong. The Charlie Company commander got hit, and Libs took over, ordering his troops to drag their dead and wounded toward the center of Charlie Company's ever-shrinking defensive circle. The Viet Cong kept firing and advancing, despite the artillery pouring in on them from the rear. Hall, like his buddies, picked up a rifle and ammo from a wounded comrade whenever the one he was firing ran out of bullets. Nobody ran. Everybody just kept firing. The noise, the screams, the smoke made this patch of jungle a little hell on Earth. Twice, Viet Cong grenades and mortars exploded near Hall and lifted him off the ground. Each time, he briefly lost consciousness, regained it, and resumed firing. He noticed that grenade fragments had cut into his right forearm.

The battle raged from early afternoon into the night. Neither side would give up. Hall smelled tear gas coming from the 4th platoon behind him. He learned later that his fellow fighters had donned gas masks and thrown the only thing they had left, tear-gas grenades, at the Viet Cong breaking through their lines. The enemy knifed through the masks and slit the throats of the Americans. But the Viet Cong failed to overrun the rest of Charlie Company. They broke off the fight around midnight before DePuy's reinforcing rifle company finally reached the battle. Charlie Company had won, if losing 110 men -- 35 killed and 75 wounded -- out of the original 134 can be called a victory. That's a casualty rate of 82 percent. Years later, Hall went to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial -- the Wall -- in Washington and cried unashamedly as he traced with his forefinger the engraved names of every one of his dead buddies from Charlie Company.

Rites Of Passage

In 1967, Hall left Vietnam and the Army. He settled back into life in Eagle, Wis., and soothed his re-entry by hunting in the Kettle Moraine State Forest on the edge of town. He worked at blue-collar, heavy-lifting jobs, he drank lots of beer, he played baseball, batting .600 in a softball league, and he tried to put the horror of what he had been through behind him.

He watched with dismay as the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and other parts of the government he had fought for began questioning the value of the Vietnam War. He read in the press about the many lies his government had told about the war's causes and what it did after its forces got in the country. Hall, like thousands of other Vietnam vets, felt ill-used, and he vowed to be far more skeptical when the next war came along.

Phil Hall's life brightened in 1971 in the person of Barbara Pettit. He saw her walking down a leafy street in Eagle, leaned out of his 1969 dark-blue Mustang convertible with the top down, and asked Pettit and her female companion, "Hey! Where you going?" Her friend knew the other man in Hall's car, so they decided to climb in and ride around the town a bit. Phil Hall ("I got dumped about 40 times by other women," he chuckled) and Barbara Pettit clicked. They were married in November of that year and, after living in several other places, built -- largely with Phil's labor -- a 2,400-square-foot A-frame house in the state forest. They worked hard and ate a lot of deer and turkey that Phil shot. They soon had three children -- two boys and a girl.

Barbara worked mornings at McDonald's or Hardee's while Phil stayed home with the kids. Then Barbara would come home, and Phil would go to work so there would always be at least one parent on hand. He got steady jobs and rose through the ranks to head a maintenance department.

John and Matthew celebrated the rites of passage for boys in that rural part of America -- getting their pictures taken with the first deer and the first turkey that they had shot. **Nikki** was competitive, both outdoors and in school, with her older brother, John, and younger one, Matt. All three children were taught to be polite, to study hard (especially history), and to get as much education as they could. The older son, John, started playing soldier almost as soon as he could walk, while in sixth grade, he resolved to attend the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. It wasn't Phil's idea. He never discussed Vietnam around the house, and he hid his Bronze Star and other medals. But he never dissed the Army, either. Vietnam wasn't the Army's fault, after all. The Army just did what the president ordered it to do.

But neither parent forgot the government's deception. So they had mixed feelings when all three of their children, one after the other, decided to become Army officers.

John won an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1990; Nikki matched him, winning admittance to the academy in 1993; and Matthew in 1997 joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps at New Mexico Military Institute where he was commissioned a second lieutenant. He finished up at Purdue University in 2001 with a degree in engineering.

"When John first left for West Point in 1990, I had a bad dream about it," Phil Hall recalled. "But after that, I told myself that he was a smart guy and that's where he wanted to be. I'm very proud of him."

Barbara Hall said, "I think you would be a very bad parent if you tried to make life choices for your children. All you can do is to give them the tools to make their own choices. They can't be expected to lead the life that you wanted them to lead. You would hope that you would have raised kids strong enough to make their own soul."

At West Point, John rose to the top 5 percent of his class. He achieved the rank of cadet captain and received top honors in history. He could have gone into a safer branch, but he chose infantry, as his father had done before him.

"I couldn't figure out why I was the only mother crying at John's graduation" in 1994, Barbara Hall recalled. "The other mothers were so proud and happy. The minute your child enters the military, or graduates from West Point, you know that from that moment on, he is free and available to guard his country. So the worry is always there.

"But I knew what John had signed up for. I knew he wanted to be tested. He said once that he'd like to have a minor gunshot wound just once, so he could know how it feels. I said, 'I think I would prefer you go interview someone who had been wounded.'" John is now Army Capt. John Hall. The 30-year-old is at the University of North Carolina, earning both his master's and doctorate in history in preparation for teaching the subject at West Point. The Army will probably not send him to Iraq if there is a war, but he could end up in the region if the conflict spreads.

Nikki, 28, went to West Point in 1993, but found the treatment she and other women received demeaning. She quit after three semesters and finished her college education at the University of Wisconsin (Whitewater). She is now Nikki Morehouse, mother of **Logan**, 4, and living in Johnson Creek, Wis. She watches news about Iraq intently, knowing that Matthew would certainly go into battle at the outset of hostilities, with John perhaps sent to the trouble zone later.

Matthew, who rose quickly in the ranks of the ROTC, could have gone into the Reserves after graduating from Purdue, but he chose to go into the active-duty infantry like his father and brother. "He wanted a more active role, so he would know that he personally had made a difference," Barbara Hall said. "He wanted to be tested. No one, male or female, knows what's inside of them until they get into a situation that tests them. For Matt to have sat in an office drawing engineering designs would never have tested the inner emotional strength. He would never know for sure what he offered. It was something he wanted to explore while he still had the youth and freedom to explore it."

She has talked only once with Matt about his feelings on participating in an invasion of Iraq. "He made the comment that one can really never be happy about going to war. One can be relieved that the wait is over. But this is not something to look forward to doing. It's something to look forward to having behind you and being done, but not to do it.

"I'm not worried about him packing up to go," she said. "When he deploys will be the more anxious time. I'm worried about when they unpack and get there. I don't do Matt any good if he knows I'm sitting back here worrying about him. It just adds one more piece of baggage to what he has to be concerned about. Worrying constantly about him would be like paying interest on a loan you never took out."

Impeccable logic. But Barbara is also a mother. "I don't think you can put it out of your mind," she said of her youngest going to war. "You just can't. You just have to try to keep it in perspective."

Lt. Matthew Hall's platoon is waiting at Fort Campbell, Ky., for the call to deploy. It is armed with TOW (tube-optically or wire guided anti-tank) missiles. The record of this young lieutenant with a penchant for military history suggests a thoughtful leader, not a reckless one. One of the many military books on a bedroom bookshelf in the Hall home is *Military Blunders*, by **Michael Coffey**.

If Matthew is ordered to fight in Iraq, as seems likely, Phil Hall said, "I'd like to go with him. I know there are so many things that can happen and do happen. You have to protect your back, make sure guys

don't fall asleep even if you have to be a hard-ass, stay alert, treat every step as one more step toward getting out alive. In the field, I never slept. I just dozed and then really zonked out when I got back to the rear. I'd like to go in and tell Matt all these things, but I'm too old."

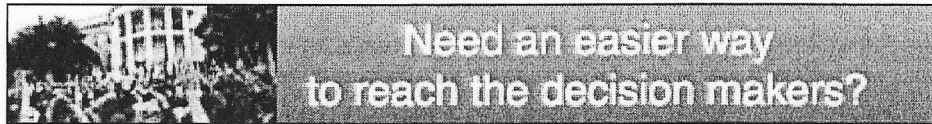
So he and Barbara Hall, like millions of others with kin in the military, spend their days now waiting and worrying -- and hoping for the best.

Staff Correspondent George C. Wilson is the author of [Mud Soldiers: Life Inside the New American Army](#).

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