

Marine Killed in Iraq Remembered by Former Teachers in St. Ignace, Kentucky

Lance Cpl. Thomas Echols Attended St. Ignace, Pickford Elementary Schools

By Paul Gingras

A Marine who lived part of his life in St. Ignace and Pickford was killed by a sniper's bullet when insurgents ambushed his patrol in the Al Anbar province of Iraq Monday, December 4, his grandfather told *The St. Ignace News*.

Lance Corporal Thomas P. Echols of Shepherdsville, Kentucky, was 20 years old and on his second tour of duty in Iraq when he died. He was part of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, stationed in Fallujah, Iraq. His home base was Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

The son of Rose and Kurt Echols, who once served as the commanding Chief Warrant Officer at U.S. Coast Guard Station St. Ignace, Thomas Echols attended St. Ignace Elementary School until the family moved to Kentucky. He was graduated from Riverview High

At right: Lance Corporal Thomas Echols of the U.S. Marine Corps cleans his weapon in Ramadi, Iraq, October 29. Mr. Echols spent part of his childhood in St. Ignace and Pickford. (Photograph courtesy of the United States Department of Defense, taken by U.S. Army Sergeant Timothy Stephens)

School in Shepherdsville April 16, 2004.

Karen Young of Riverview was his English and social studies teacher.

"Tom was a great guy," she said, "motivated and goal minded. From the first day I met him, he said he was going to be a Marine. I guess it was a lifelong goal. He loved our county and believed in freedom."

In his senior writing portfolio,



Mr. Echols wrote about his decision to join the Marines over other branches of military service, and he lived that goal, she said. He was also involved in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) at a nearby school, prior to transferring to Riverview.

"He was a practical joker and liked to have fun," Mrs. Young added.

Friends and staff at Riverview have taken the news hard, she said. Five other graduates from Riverview are currently in Iraq.

One of Mr. Echols' high school projects was to frame a picture of himself. At the bottom of the frame he inscribed the words, "Man of Steel."

"I took this as, 'I'm a strong person,'" Mrs. Young said.

Superman was one of his favorite

cartoon characters, she added.

"I think that's because [Superman] represented doing good," Mrs. Young said.

Lance Cpl. Echols entered the Marine Corps in March or April 2004, said his grandfather, Donald Wight, who lives with his wife, Mary, in Clay Township. "He would have been 21

years old on January 2," Mr. Wight said, and he and his wife, Allyson, were looking forward to the birth of their first child in late April or early May.

"He was a fun-loving young man who liked to have a good time," and he was very active, Mr. Wight said of his grandson. He liked the outdoors and was passionate about athletics. In high school, he participated in football and track and he was a great fan of University of Michigan football.

"He was as fanatical a U of M fan as I've known," Mr. Wight said.

"He made sure I was aware of all the successes U of M was having."

The last time Donald Wight and his grandson spent time alone together was in 2002 when they attended a U-M football game against the University of Iowa.

When Tom Echols was born in 1986 in St. Clair, his father, Kurt Echols, was serving aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Bramble*. The family later

moved to North Carolina for two years, then returned to St. Clair for another three years on the *Bramble*. They were transferred to St. Ignace in the 1990s for three years.

Elaine MacDonald, who teaches fifth grade language arts and social studies at St. Ignace Area Schools, remembers Thomas Echols well as a third-grade student during the 1994/1995 school year.

"He was just an awesome little kid," she said. "He moved to the Soo that year, and I felt so bad that

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Thomas Echols, who went to elementary school in St. Ignace, was killed by a sniper in Iraq December 4. He is pictured here among his peers in Elaine MacDonald's 1994/1995 third-grade class. Pictured (front, from left) are Elaine MacDonald, Katti Gamble, Nikki Neitzke, Sarah Reeves, Thomas Echols, John Ross Cross, Starr Strack, and Gina Della-Moretta; (middle) Cassandra Rutledge, Randy Briggs, Rachelle Laverty, Melissa McNeely, Matt Beaudoin, Stephanie Sexton, Brandon Eisenman; (back) Jeremy Baker, Jeremy Bloxson, Chris Graham, Megan Robare, Christian Stenson, Crystal Mitchell, Shawna Shimkovitz, and Jessica Cassibo; (absent) Elizabeth Ruegg and Jessica Talentino. (Photograph courtesy of St. Ignace Area Schools)

City Adopts \$2.15 Million General Fund Budget

By Ryan Schlehuber

The City of St. Ignace will operate with \$2.15 million in its general fund for 2007, with a total budget, including operation of its utilities and marina, of just under \$8 million. City Council adopted its 2007 budget during its regular meeting Monday, December 18, and also approved a St. Ignace Chamber of Commerce request to give special events status to its new mud run, which will be held three times over the summer.

The city will levy 16.26 mills, the same as last year, to raise \$1.4 million in taxes, based on an estimated taxable value of city real estate that totals \$85,263,225. From the millage, \$1,153,600 will go to the city's general fund, \$157,260 will be captured by the Downtown Development Authority, and \$75,602 will go to the city's recreation program.

There was little discussion about the new budget before Council adopted it. Council held a five-minute public hearing on the issue, but no issues were raised by the audience, which consisted mostly of city department heads.

The budget ordinance, Ordinance 610, will be effective January 1, 2007.

The Chamber of Commerce is expected to hold mud runs near Little Bear East Ice Arena and Conference Center May 19, July 7, and September 8. Owing to some complaints from nearby residents, the mud run course was pushed behind the Little Bear East facility, further away from Murray Street.

Chamber Executive Director Janet Peterson and City Manager Eric Dodson believe they have responded to resident concerns about the mud run, which features vehicles competing for the fastest

time through a mud course.

A petition, signed by 13 nearby residents, was submitted to the city, which listed concerns the residents had with holding a mud run within city limits, including excessive noise and environmental safety at the nearby wetlands and pond.

Because the events will be held between noon and 5 p.m., it does not violate any city noise regulations, said Mr. Dodson. He also reported that the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality doesn't believe the event will contaminate the wetlands.

The course is on city property and not in the wetlands, Mr. Dodson said.

St. Ignace and nearby townships are hashing out financial details on the Allied EMS purchase of a new \$88,000 ambulance, which the units will help pay for. Roughly \$12,000 will be contributed by the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. The city agreed November 6 to cover 47 percent, or \$42,300. Five townships will also contribute, based on their populations. Moran Township will be expected to pay 18 percent of the cost, while St. Ignace Township will pay 17 percent, Brevort Township 11 percent, Hudson Township four percent, and Hendricks Township three percent.

Allied operates the emergency medical service for the six units.

"Everyone is on board, it is just a matter of how they are on board," said Mr. Dodson, explaining that some townships are deciding whether to pay their portions up front or in installments.

Mayor Paul Grondin appointed Lynne Piippo to one of two vacant seats on the city's Recreation

Advisory Committee. Mrs. Piippo is the new executive director for the St. Ignace Visitor's Bureau. She replaces Kelly Simmons, the former Visitor's Bureau executive director, on the committee.

Mayor Grondin said he will probably make the last appointment by the next council meeting.

Mr. Dodson said the city's fire department rating of six (10 being the highest and worst rating), by the Insurance Services Organization (ISO), is not likely to change, as it has not for the past 20 years.

St. Ignace Fire Chief John "Bucky" Robinson said the only way St. Ignace can improve its rating is by "throwing a lot of money toward fire equipment and staff."

The rating corresponds with the city's insurance rates, explained Mr. Dodson. He cited three things that keeps the city's rating where it is: 1) it is a volunteer department, 2) the city has no ladder truck with which to fight fires in taller buildings, and 3) the city has three-story buildings, including motels, which would benefit from a ladder truck.

Councilman Don Gustafson speculated many fire departments in the Upper Peninsula are volunteer and that a rating of six is probably common.

Mr. Dodson said Mackinaw City and Cheboygan are rated six, Sault Ste. Marie and Petoskey are rated five, and some areas outside Petoskey are rated nine.

Council agreed its rating is satisfactory, considering how the rating system is set up.

"It seems to be the ISO rating is stacked toward urban fire departments," said Councilman Gustafson.

Mr. Dodson added that the ISO is funded by insurance companies.

State Shortfall Could Cost Schools \$170 Per Student

St. Ignace School Board Learns Funding Level Will Be Determined in February

By Paul Gingras

A \$300 million shortfall in the Michigan School Aid fund may reduce expected revenue from the state by as much as \$170 per student, although it won't be determined until February if this will occur, reported Mike Springsteen, superintendent of St. Ignace Area Schools, at a school board meeting Monday, December 11. The potential loss could amount to \$132,000 for the district, ultimately leading St. Ignace schools to curtail non-essential supply orders and maintenance projects. The district wants to avoid any staff cuts, Mr. Springsteen said.

In August, the state reported a \$300 million increase in its foundation allowance for students in public schools, and informed school districts that Michigan would increase its per-student allotment by \$210 per student, with an additional \$23 per student for an equity payment for the state's lowest funded schools, such as St. Ignace Area Schools. With the promised increase in mind, the district planned to have \$7,108 per student this year, up from \$6,875 last year.

"Often, you get the most pessimistic viewpoint from the state," Mr. Springsteen said regarding the prospective loss of school aid rev-

enue.

State education planners will hold a conference Wednesday, January 10, after which the legislature will have 30 days to decide how the school aid shortfall will be dealt with. In the meantime, state planners are encouraging school administrators to make plans for best and worst case scenarios, he said.

Mr. Springsteen declined to comment on what the district would do in a worst-case scenario. The district "would have to examine cutting services," but again, would "try to maintain all basic programs," he said. To be more specific at this point would be speculative, he told the board.

The information Mr. Springsteen reported in a memo to the board came from Tom White, executive director of the Michigan School Business Association at a meeting of the Michigan Association of School Administrators in Marquette December 6.

The meeting also covered inconsistencies in state spending, Mr. Springsteen said. Despite declining revenue, the state has increased spending by 7.9 percent over the past four years, including a 3.1 percent increase for primary and secondary schools. Inflation, however,

has increase 7.9 percent over the same period.

Funding for the State Department of Corrections increased by 16.4 percent and for the Michigan Department of Community Health increased by 47 percent.

"It is the legislature and the governor's job to sort our priorities and fund them adequately, according to the money available," Mr. Springsteen wrote in his memo. "We need to make sure that our legislators are educated about the need for adequate funding of public schools."

He also asked the board to promote equality in school aid.

"There is no adequate argument for why one district is funded at \$7,108 per student, while another is funded at \$8,000 per student, and yet another at \$12,000 per student. Yet that is exactly what has been happening for many years," he told the board.

In better news, he told the board that parents are making use of a new online data delivery system called Power School, which enables parents and students to obtain detailed information, such as their children's grades, homework, attendance, and hot lunch activity.

In other business, the board voted to reinstate the school's ninth-grade volleyball program, which

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Members of the St. Ignace Community Children's Choir performed at the St. Ignace Area Schools board meeting Monday evening, December 11. The choir, made up of children of varying ages and from different schools in the community, as well as those who are home-schooled, is directed by Stephanie Terpening. Singers also performed at two St. Ignace Area Schools Christmas concerts last week.

'Polar Express'

Santa Visits Library for Movie Night

Santa Claus and three of his helpers (not pictured) visited children at the Library's movie night to wish them all a Merry Christmas, and politely reminded them to leave a snack for him on Christmas Eve.



At left: Cindy LaChapelle and her grandson, Parker Tracy, as well as a few other youngsters, enjoyed watching the Christmas movie "Polar Express" at the St. Ignace Library Thursday evening, December 14. It was the second time the library held the event, sponsored by Friends of the St. Ignace Public Library. A movie night will be planned once a month. In January, the Library will show the PG-rate movie "How To Eat Fried Worms." The specific day and time will be announced later.