

A legacy set in stone



COURTESY RETIRED MAJ. VAN HARL

Mother, rescue pilot among troops to be remembered this holiday season



VAN HARL

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In the Jemez Mountains of the Santa Fe National Forest, about three hours' drive out of Albuquerque, N.M., is a wonderful place called Rancho del Chaparral. It is the summer camp for the Chaparral Girl Scout Council of Albuquerque.

When I was stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base, our daughter attended many Scout functions there. I came to like it so much that for three years, I would spend weeks at a time volunteering my labor, helping the camp ranger do needed maintenance.

Before moving to New Mexico, my daughter and I had done Civil War re-enacting, and I built a wooden handcart, which the troops of that era used to remove the wounded and dead from the battlefield. I kept it in my front yard with a U.S. flag posted on it and the names of service members I knew were deployed.

One day, while working in my front yard, an Air Force rescue helicopter flew low over my home. I looked at it and my handcart and realized the rescue helicopter was the modern-day version of the venerable old handcart. I went into the house to write a poem titled "The Handcart Boys" — about the men and women who risk their lives in helicopters to

bring our injured and dead troops home.

Days after I wrote that poem, on March 23, 2003, the Air Force lost a Pave Hawk rescue helicopter in Afghanistan. The co-pilot, Capt. Tamara Long Archuleta, was from Belen, N.M. She had been an active Girl Scout in her youth and had spent many happy days camping at Rancho del Chaparral. I sent the poem to her minister, who conducted the funeral. To my surprise, it was used in the eulogy.

There is a large rock sticking out of the ground in a clearing at the camp. This landmark is used as a navigation aid by flight-for-life helicopter pilots if someone is seriously injured. I named it Rescue Rock and started working with the Girl Scouts to develop a memorial for Captain Tammy.

The camp ranger and I dug large boulders out of the side of the mountain to establish a 30-foot stone ring around Rescue Rock. A local church group provided most of the back-breaking labor and technical support. The council had a memorial stone carved, and it was placed in front of Rescue Rock.

During the planning, I got to know Tammy's parents, Richard and Cindy Long. Everybody thinks their child is special, but Tammy was.

She was a world-class karate champion, distinguished college graduate, an Air Force officer and rescue pilot and a mother. When she died, she was due to leave Afghanistan within weeks to come home and be married.

She had wanted to be a rescue pilot since she was a little girl. She even developed a board game in school called "Rescue Princess." This game was different; the princess went out and risked her life to save, not be saved. This was what she was doing on her last mission, trying to rescue two injured Afghan children.

She wanted to be a career Air Force officer and most likely would not have been home for the holidays in New Mexico this year if she was still on active duty. But now, she isn't coming home ever again.

No Christmas Eve service at the little Methodist Church in Belen. No seeing the folks, no new husband to kiss on New Year's Eve, and no young son to hold. She was a hero for her country, for her Air Force, for her family and, most important, for her son.

Remember your veterans, but whenever you can, hold tight your active-duty family members. You never know what tomorrow will bring. Make this time count. □

Rescue Rock was set up as a memorial to Capt. Tamara Long Archuleta, a Pave Hawk pilot who died in Afghanistan in 2003. The rock sits at Rancho del Chaparral, a Girl Scout camp the captain — and the writer's daughter — attended in New Mexico.