

Norwalk remembers Wilfredo Perez Jr.

By Howard V. Sann

A requiem for 'Junior'

"This is a day that we hoped would never come," said Ed Downing, chairman of the Norwalk Veterans Memorial Committee. "It's been over 30 years. We never wanted this day to come, but we knew it was coming, and now that day is here."

That day was May 23, when the name of Spc. Wilfredo Perez Jr., 24, who met his fate in Iraq, was added to the Shea-Magrath Memorial at Calf Pasture Beach. It had been 34 years since a son of Norwalk had fallen in war, all the way back to 1969 and Vietnam.

The day that Will Perez Sr., 43, hoped would never come was July 27, 2003, a muggy Sunday when at 6 a.m. the knock on the door of his East Norwalk home — where his son, Junior, as he was known, lived the last half of his life — brought the worst possible news.

Junior, like many young Americans, felt the call to serve after the Sept. 11 attacks. He joined in April 2002. The Army was also going to lead to his college education. Instead, on July 26, 2003, he became the first Connecticut soldier killed since President Bush declared May 1 that "major combat operations" had ended.

Back then, Norwalk Mayor Alex Knopp made a "solemn pledge" to the Perez family that Junior's "honorable life will be remembered." The May 23 ceremony was part of that.

"The price for freedom is very high" was the theme echoed in a half dozen speeches delivered in front of the imposing red brick monument that holds remembrance of that price: the names of the 209 Norwalk soldiers who made "the ultimate sacrifice" in World War II, Korea and Vietnam (the 45 GIs from World War I are honored on the Green).

"The 4th Infantry Division is known for capturing Saddam Hussein," said keynote speaker Capt. Pernell Robinson, the commanding officer of Junior's unit. "But my concern is the 79 brave soldiers from the 4th I.D. who didn't make it back."

In the front row was Perez Sr., his wife, Vicki, and 1½-year-old son Roman and their family, joined by more than 200 people. Robinson detailed the 4th I.D.'s movements from mobilization to entering Iraq from the south in April 2003, up to the Sunni Muslim town of Ba'qubah, 45 miles

northeast of Baghdad, where Perez's unit, Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 67th Armor Division, "were guarding a children's hospital when a grenade was dropped from the upper floors." Below were eight GIs playing cards on a break. Three were killed: Junior, and two other members of his mortar squad.

Robinson then presented Will Perez Sr. with the 4th Infantry Division's colors.

"I want to thank everyone for coming today not only to honor these men," Perez said, motioning behind to the wall, "but also for showing respect for my son. Thank you."

The American Festival Concert Band played "America the Beautiful." While featured soprano vocalist Elizabeth Wilson from the Connecticut National Guard 102nd Army Band sang, I realized Capt. Robinson could have mentioned that Junior had made three ranks in less than a year. And when the brigade commander needed a couple of soldiers to go into Ba'qubah to arrest the police chief, Junior was recruited. He wasn't big, maybe 5 feet 9 inches, but he was a kid off the streets of Queens, New York. Junior and two others took the town's top cop into custody in broad daylight on a crowded street in a couple of minutes, which earned Junior, posthumously, the Army's Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service. He also was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.

No one there except family knew that Will had an extraordinarily close relationship with Junior: Will had brought him to Connecticut and turned him around; father and son were best friends, played together and worked together. Junior had an understanding of love of family, community and country. At 13, he marched with the Sea Cadets in the Desert Storm victory parade in New York. In 1995, he volunteered at the Special Olympics World Games. Enlisting in the Army was the last piece to becoming his own man.

When the song was over, Will, Vicki and family moved to the back of the monument, on the waterside, for the unveiling of Junior's plaque from the Veterans Memorial Committee. On the wall are three plaques: the names of the nine soldiers killed in Korea, the 184 he gave their lives in World War II and the names of the 16 from Vietnam, covered with white gauze. Then Perez and the mayor

pulled down the delicate fabric, unveiling the plaque that said: "Spc. Wilfredo Perez Jr. — Iraq 2003."

Rabbi Yehoshua Hecht of Beth Israel Synagogue offered a blessing. Mayor Knopp said, "This memorial is a tribute to Junior's bravery, courage, and sacrifice. The city will never forget the sacrifices he made for his country."

And it was done. Another step in remembrance, Junior's name on the wall. Forever.

Afterwards, many approached Will and Vicki to express their support. When the crowd dispersed, Vicki Perez helped the city workers fold, carry and load the chairs onto the truck.

Off to one side, Will Perez, a man of quiet dignity, was holding his little boy, Roman, the brother Junior never met. One day the father will tell Roman about Junior, how he made people laugh; he will tell his youngest son how the scholarship for Junior was created at Norwalk High School, and about the last letter Junior wrote from Iraq, which arrived the day after they'd learned he was gone. It was sent to his stepbrother, Joseph, 15. At the outset, Junior is giving Joseph a short course on how to talk to girls. Then:

"I'm sitting here in a Humvee listening to the radio waiting to send 47-lb. self propelled missiles into someone's house or farm. . . . 11:30 pm right now. Anyway we have been attacked with mortar rounds (just not as big as ours). But they are just as deadly as ours if they hit near you. You know, if something does happen to me out here and I can't make it home, you have to buck up and be the man and take care of everybody. But it all starts with finishing school; first you have to finish school to take care of yourself. See, this is all fine, but if I'd finished school I would be sitting behind a desk somewhere not sitting in a truck in the heat in the middle of Iraq. Do me one favor if something happens to me: Finish school. Be good OK. Don't get stupid in front of females."

There's a lifetime for Will to tell Roman about his big brother. And he will. Perez is a patient man with a long memory and enough impressions, recollections and stories to sustain him for a lifetime, and to keep Junior's memory alive.

Howard V. Sann, a friend of the Perez family, is a Norwalk-based writer and editor. He wrote this piece for The Advocate.