

War, the uninvited guest, crashes the wedding party

By HOWARD V. SANN

At the rehearsal dinner for the wedding of my wife's daughter, I'm sitting in a restaurant in

Manhattan's Chinatown opposite two men: my brother-in-law, Will Perez, 48, stocky and clean-shaven, and, to his immediate left, a tall, red-bearded man perhaps 10 years older with small wire-frame glasses — a throwback to the 1960s.

The red-bearded man tells my wife he's a native Californian but lived in Toronto for many years.

"Doing what?" she asks.

"I was in the Marines, deserted after Kent State and fled to Canada." It is clear in his voice that this was — and is — his badge of honor.

My brother-in-law, who lost his 24-year-old son in Iraq almost four years ago, brings memories of his son and the war with him wherever he goes. Now, for the 12 wedding guests squeezed around the small round table, that other war has unexpectedly returned. There's a hush as waiters place appetizers on the table, but it doesn't distract from the cruel irony that's just been served.

The red-bearded man had joined the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War, but on May 4, 1970, after National Guardsmen fired into a large crowd of student demonstrators (protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia) on the Kent State campus (killing four students, wounding nine), his heart and mind changed.

Kent State was his call to conscience.

On 9/11 my brother-in-law watched on TV as the first plane

hit the World Trade Center and yelled to his son, whom everyone called "Junior," and Junior came running up from the basement; together, they stood in shock and horror as the second plane hit — and the towers fell — until Junior finally broke the silence with: "I'm going after them."

September 11 was his call to conscience.

"A lot of us were up there," the red-bearded man said, speaking about Canada.

"During the Vietnam War," my wife said, "at one point 30,000 Americans a month were deserting," but then, realizing Junior's father, her youngest sister's husband, was sitting across from her next to the red-bearded man, she began to feel uncomfortable and retreated from the conversation hoping it would end.

"Going to Canada was the best decision I ever made," the red-bearded man said. "The best thing I ever did for myself." In the north he would find his career and build a life.

Enlisting in the U.S. Army was the last piece to Junior's becoming his own man. A talented artist, he intended to serve two years, then go to college and study graphic design.

"If my son was called," said the groom's father, in from the suburbs of Chicago and also unaware of the circumstances of Junior's death, "I'd never let him go."

By now, my wife has long left the conversation, her back turned to us, immersed in animated chatter with her daughter.

Throughout, my brother-in-law just sat there staring straight

ahead, not eating; listening, not saying a word. When the talk shifted, awkwardly again, to — of all things — war movies, my brother-in-law joined in as if the red-bearded man sitting next to him hadn't deserted and fled to Canada. When the talk was about the wedding, my brother-in-law ate.

Since losing Junior on July 26, 2003 — in a grenade attack while his Fourth Infantry Division unit was guarding a hospital in Baqubah, a town 45 miles northeast of Baghdad — my brother-in-law has been making sure the city makes good on then-Mayor Alex A. Knopp's "solemn pledge" that Junior's "honorable life will be remembered." It has, despite Knopp's loss of the 2004 election and objections from local veterans groups, thanks to Mayor Richard A. Moccia.

The next day, driving over the Triborough Bridge to the wedding on Long Island, neither my brother-in-law nor I broach the subject of last night's encounter with the red-bearded man, even as we face the New York skyline, absent the Twin Towers.

Most of the hour-long trip is spent reviewing my brother-in-law's plans for the 10 a.m. ceremony this Saturday when the city of Norwalk — officially founded on Sept. 11, 1651 — will dedicate a flagpole and name a walkway in Oyster Shell Park in honor of Army Spc. Wilfredo Perez Jr., the first Norwalk soldier killed in war since Vietnam in 1969.

After the wedding and dinner, the red-bearded man urgently approaches, looking distraught.

"I feel terrible," he says, apologetically. "Your wife just told

me. If I'd known Will's son had been killed in Iraq I would've never talked about my desertion. Does Will think his son died in vain?"

"No. Never," I say. "Junior was doing what he wanted, and proud of it."

"How does Will do it?" he asks.

"He's tireless. He wants people to remember our freedoms aren't free."

Not the answer he was looking for, the red-bearded man again asks: "But how does he deal with it?"

It's the hypothetical that no one with children wants to consider; the question I ask myself every time I see my brother-in-law.

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