

AMERICAN ALBUM

## A Soldier Comes Home to Alaska, Too Early and Yet Too Late



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

**A MIDDLE EAST WAR REACHES THE ARCTIC CIRCLE** From left, ribbons honoring the Alaska Guard members from Barrow; Mia Sanchez, Melba Nowpakahok and Cecille Wesierski, wives of Guard members; Sgt. Billy Brown's grave.

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**A FINAL HONOR** Sergeant Brown is buried in the Elders Cemetery.

BARROW, [Alaska](#) — When the soldiers from the frozen tundra shipped out for the burning sands of [Iraq](#), Staff Sgt. Billy Brown promised the women that he'd bring their men back alive.

But when Sergeant Brown returned just two weeks later, he didn't bring his men at all. He came with a funeral detail. He came cargo, in

“He signed up for it and it is his duty to go, but I don’t like this war at all,” said Mia Sanchez, a mother of five whose husband, Jay, enlisted three years ago. “I don’t understand it. I thought he’d be protecting Alaska, not Iraq.”

Melba Nowpakahok, whose husband, Owen, had Billy Brown for his best man, said that as a military wife it would be counterproductive to question any of it.

“We’re just going to go with whatever the higher-ups say,” she said. “Whatever the president says. Whatever Rumsfeld says. We’re just going to have to go with it.”

The eight remaining men from Barrow are to arrive in the Iraqi theater sometime in October, and one company of Arctic soldiers will carry its flag with Billy Brown’s name tag sewn to it.

And when the fall whale hunt begins, a new man will be holding the oar that Billy Brown once held.

and smokestacks and a Japanese restaurant. City ways have brought city problems. Methamphetamines and alcohol are afflictions. The native language is spoken less and less. Satellite television is the entertainment of choice, and fewer young people hunt nowadays. Residents increasingly rely on the grocery store freezer rather than the winter larder.

Still, the place is poor. Broken windows are stuffed with newspapers. Houses are weather-beaten affairs of wood on stilts with metal roofs, perpetually heated with natural gas from a field off in the muskeg. Billy Brown's was spare and unpainted, well kept with few adornments. He lived next to his father.

The sun in Barrow disappears from Nov. 18 until Jan. 24, and the temperature can reach 99 below. The roads are gravel, because concrete disintegrates in the cold. The government, financed by oil revenues, is the main industry and because of plentiful natural gas, heating bills are only \$200 a month in the dead of winter. Milk is \$10 a gallon. Gasoline is \$4. "Never Forget" placards are displayed in house windows and on car bumpers, a reference to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. And now, just as much, a reference to Billy Brown.

Sergeant Brown's hometown is not a hissing coal-bed of antiwar activism, yet with his death the doubts began to surface.

"Is it going so badly in the Middle East that the military has to scrape up a few hundred Eskimos and send them to the desert?" asked David Leavitt, a friend, who had butchered caribou hanging from his porch balustrade, drying in the Arctic sun. "I mean he wanted to go, but what's the purpose? We lost Billy for what purpose?"

The soldiers' wives talk as soldiers' wives do. They talk of pride. They talk about unflinching support for their men. But now that Billy Brown, the leader of their men, has come home in a box, they talk with a slight edge about fear and doubt.

“He could have retired years ago,” said his niece Audrey Saganna. But he volunteered for the mission so other soldiers who had served multiple tours in Iraq could get a rest, she said.

The funeral of William Franklin Brown lasted many hours, Eskimo tradition holding that anyone who wanted to speak could do so. It took 20 men an entire day to dig his grave through the permafrost. Tribal leaders decided he should be buried in the Elders Cemetery, a great honor here. His grave is marked like the others, with a simple wooden cross. He is buried next to his father.

Born in the mining town of Lost River on the Seward Peninsula in western Alaska, Sergeant Brown grew up in Barrow, one of 18 brothers and sisters. Whaling is the centerpiece of the culture and Sergeant Brown worked as an oarsman on one crew and was a walrus and polar bear hunter. He worked for a spell at the post office, was elected to the City Council and eventually settled in as the shipping and receiving manager at the local hospital.

By virtue of his hospital job, Sergeant Brown was in attendance when nearly every Barrow child was born. He did not do this out of obligation, his people said, but because he was proud to be Inupiaq.

He never married and fathered no children of his own, but Sergeant Brown was an uncle and a counselor to dozens of struggling young men, and by native tradition, under which age is respected and revered, he was an uncle to hundreds more.

The call-up has affected Eskimo villages all across the state, some of the most remote and rugged corners of this country. The men come from places like Kongiganak, Emmonak and Scammon Bay, where winter survival depends on the summer harvest of otter, moose, geese, fish and whale. With the men gone, the long, brutal winter is expected to be even more bitter for those they’ve left behind.

Barrow is different from the Eskimo villages. Oil revenues from Prudhoe Bay have made it something of a city. There are flush toilets

a silver coffin with wood handles cloaked in an American flag. He is believed to be the first Eskimo killed because of this war. He was 54.

Sergeant Brown, an Alaska national guardsman, never got to a battlefield. He was killed when a tractor-trailer slammed into the back of his Humvee late in July while he was on training maneuvers at Camp Shelby in Mississippi.

His death rattled this town of 4,200, mostly Inupiaq Eskimos, located 500 roadless miles from anywhere and 350 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

Finally, tangibly, the war has reached one of the most isolated corners of the country.

“Until now the war was more like a television show,” said Edward S. Itta, mayor of the North Slope Borough, in which Barrow lies, and a friend of Sergeant Brown’s. “You don’t question the war until it touches you. Only then, when a man like Billy, an important man to us, comes home dead, does the question become clear. We fight. But to what end? What’s in it for my grandchildren?”

During the cold war, the battle line was drawn right here on the North Slope, with the Soviets skulking just across the Bering Strait. Most Alaska Guard members stayed in the state, protecting the home front.

But the world has changed. For this war, 670 Guard members have been called up from rural Alaska, its largest foreign deployment ever. The Alaska Guard estimates that one-third of its members are Eskimo, so most likely a third of those deployed are indigenous men, officials say, though the military does not keep official racial records of this type.

Among the most skilled was Staff Sergeant Brown, a 29-year veteran of the Guard and an Arctic survival specialist.