

## Update

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### Local military family supports son

*By Steph Slater, Staff Writer*

With the war in Iraq stretching past the three-year mark, local families and community members are still dedicated to supporting the troops and their efforts to bring freedom to all corners of the globe.

One family, George and Glendine Benson from Minnesota, relocated to the Gila Valley in 1991 because of medical reasons related to the Vietnam Conflict of the late 1960s and early '70s.

"My father served in the Air Force and caught malaria when he served in Vietnam," Tabetha (Benson) Lundeen said. "He later experienced severe arthritis because of the disease and was advised by his doctor to move to a warmer climate."

As the youngest of four in a military family, Lundeen said she was no stranger to constantly packing up and moving out. When her father told her of the beautiful Gila Valley as an adult, she said she wasn't too concerned about moving several states away. Her parents convinced her to relocate her family to the Valley in 1996.

Back in Minnesota, Lundeen's older brother, Thomas Benson, followed in the footsteps of his father and joined the Army fresh out of high school. Close to 20 years later, Benson now serves his country in an elite group called the Ol' Guard.

"They are kind of like the Navy Seals but in the Army," she said.

Benson trained for several months starting in January for his mission in Iraq and was deployed there in April. Although Lundeen said their parents are very supportive of the war, it has been especially difficult for her mother, even after all the years her son has served in the military.

"You just don't ever want to see your kids go off to war," she said.

Lundeen said her brother's upbeat nature has also been subdued by the death and destruction all around, particularly with the losses of many friends. In a letter to his sister in mid-June, Benson wrote about his pain.

"Unfortunately, I have also lost friends and comrades here among my infantry brothers. These guys go out every day and provide security while we conduct our mission, and it is painful to lose one of them," Benson wrote. "I ask for your prayers as there is a sniper team that has killed several of our support unit (members) in the past two weeks."

Even as he struggles with the loss of his comrades, Benson is watching the U.S. military turn over more of the security responsibilities to the Iraqi Army because of the recent successes with locating insurgent leaders.

"On the day that the U.S. killed Zarqawi, we captured the leader of the insurgency," Benson wrote. "Over the past two weeks, our unit has reacted quickly to tips and information about insurgent activity, and it has resulted in 13 out of the top 20 most wanted being captured."

Benson said the capture of the insurgents has allowed a bit of relief and some breathing room for the new infantry replacing his own, making it an easier transition.

Scattered throughout dangerous battlegrounds and key cities, Benson said some towns welcome and even protect American soldiers. These cities dwell in peace in spite of the chaos and destruction around them and symbolize the hope of the people in Iraq and those who are fighting there, he said.

Benson wrote sentence after sentence thanking his friends, family and others who have written him, sent him packages and supported him in many ways. Even with the tremendous amount of support he has received, Benson wrote that there are many soldiers who get nothing.

"Your letters of encouragement are small treasures here, and I am thankful for everyone who takes the time to write an e-mail or letter," he wrote.

Benson's father, George, said he was not surprised when his son joined the military. He also said all Americans should take the time to serve their country.

"My father was a bomber pilot, and my mother was one of the few nurses who would parachute," George said. "We are a military family."

George also said his son is very troubled by the media coverage in Iraq, especially when it comes to the Iraqi reporters.

"He's told me time and time again that they are just lying through their teeth," George said.

Even more disturbing is how different the children are in Iraq. The little girls are not allowed to leave their homes much and are not enrolled in schools.

"Tom said once that it makes his heart ache to see the children there in Iraq," Glendine, his mother, said. "They don't know how to do normal things like playing — and live in fear for their own lives."

Glendine said the family also has to be careful about what they say and pass on to others about their son, Tom. Covert missions, locations and other details are not to be discussed, she said.

"Tom also expressed at the end of one letter how much he misses home, family and even the call of the loon (a Minnesota bird)," she said. "You just don't know how much you miss America until you leave it and all the comforts are taken away."

Lundeen said her brother is the father of two teenage daughters (whose names we will not publish for security purposes).

Lundeen said she will be organizing a supplies drive and fund-raiser in the fall, tentatively scheduled for late October at the Arizona State Credit Union.

For information on how to support soldiers of the U.S. Armed Forces go to [www.anysoldier.com](http://www.anysoldier.com). To request a specific soldier in Benson's unit, e-mail Benson at [thomas.w.benson@us.army.mil](mailto:thomas.w.benson@us.army.mil).

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