

Soldier not dead or missing after all, but alive and free

by Charles E. Brown
Times staff reporter

Last Saturday night, Army representatives told the Lynnwood family of Army Staff Sgt. Daniel J. Stamaris Jr. that he had been killed in a helicopter crash Feb. 27 near the Iraqi border.

The next day, the Army returned to the home of Daniel Stamaris Sr. "They told us he was missing in action because there was no identification found at the site of the wreckage," said Delores Stamaris, the stepmother.

Yesterday, family members here and the soldier's wife in Alabama received Pentagon confirmation that Stamaris, 31, a 1978 Lynnwood High School graduate, was among 15 U.S. prisoners released by Iraq. "We don't really know his condition. He was taken to a (hospital) ship," his stepmother said.

Stamaris, a crew chief with the 101st Airborne stationed at Fort Rucker, Ala., had been in the

Persian Gulf since August. He enlisted in the Army nine years ago while living in Boise, Idaho.

Born in Puyallup, Stamaris spent eight years in Seattle before his family moved to Lynnwood. At Lynnwood High, he participated in football and track. After graduation, he moved to Boise, and took a job with a trailer manufacturer before enlisting in the Army.



**Sgt. Daniel
Stamaris Jr.**

Stamaris and his wife, Renee, of Enterprise, Ala., were married three months before he went to the Gulf. His mother, Betty Aucker, lives in Spokane.

"On Sunday, at least we had a ray of hope," his stepmother said. "And we knew that if anybody can survive, Danny would. He's a very strong man."

Desert Storm hero wins a war at home

Don Hannula

Times editorial columnist

IT WAS a picture that said more than a thousand words: Army Staff Sgt. Daniel J. Stamaris Jr., wounded Desert Storm hero — propped up on a gurney, wearing a maroon beret and snapping a proud salute.

It appeared on front pages across the nation. The photo of Stamaris, who grew up in Lynnwood, was a symbol of American resolve in the Persian Gulf War.

Thousands of flag-waving well-wishers cheered and a brass band played "God Bless America" that day last March when Stamaris and 20 others returned from captivity in Iraq to Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

Defense Secretary Dick Cheney told them: "Your country is opening its arms to greet you."

How quickly we forget.

Less than seven months later, Stamaris was battling the military bureaucracy to stay on active duty in the Army.

Yesterday he won a war at home that he should never have had to fight.

Stamaris suffered a broken leg and internal injuries when his Blackhawk helicopter was shot down during a search-and-rescue mission. He was attempting to rescue grounded Air Force Capt. William F. Andrews.

Initially, Stamaris' family had been told he was killed in the helicopter crash near the Iraqi border.

Now stationed at Fort Rucker in Alabama, Stamaris is taking physical therapy to mend a broken ankle, leg and pelvis. He has a rod in his upper left leg and a bolt in his pelvis.

"I probably will have some problems the rest of my life, but maybe I can get back to 90 to 95 percent health," he said. "Right now, I'm down to using one crutch."

The Department of the Army's Physical



Disability Agency was evaluating Stamaris' medical condition to determine whether he should be temporarily retired for one year or allowed to continue on active duty.

Stamaris, 31, a graduate of Lynnwood High School, had been working in Boise, Idaho, when he entered the Army. Lynnwood is his home. His father, Daniel, and stepmother, Delores, live there.

So he turned to John Miller, his 1st District congressman, for help.

"I do not want temporary retirement," Stamaris wrote to Miller. "I feel that since my injuries were incurred in combat, the service should see to my recovery on active duty. Temporary retirement would result in approximately a \$600 cut in my pay per month. This reduction in pay would place a severe financial burden on my family."

Miller met Stamaris at a military hospital last spring.

Stamaris says he would receive 75 percent of his base pay of \$1,500 a month under temporary retirement but there would be an additional loss in quarters allowance and other added pay.

"We would be forced to sell our home, since we wouldn't be able to make mortgage payments and other monthly payments on my income alone," he wrote.

Stamaris' wife, Renee, who has been working part time, is expecting a child in May.

While Stamaris is unable to perform duties in his military occupation, he has been making regular appearances at public functions as a Desert Storm hero. He felt he could contribute to the Army on active duty in a public-relations capacity until his therapy was completed.

Miller wrote to the head of the Army Congressional Liaison Office and also to Defense Secretary Cheney:

"It is difficult to believe the Army cannot find an opportunity for Mr. Stamaris' talents until he completes his recovery.

"While both you and I are under tremendous pressure to contain costs, I believe reducing the pay, benefits and stature of an injured war soldier and former prisoner of war is no place to save money."



Associated Press

Staff Sgt. Daniel J. Stamaris Jr. saluting from a gurney during the playing of "God Bless America" at Andrews Air Force Base.

The Army responded that the matter was under review. Early yesterday afternoon, Stamaris said all he could do was hope.

"Right now, no news is good news," he said.

At midafternoon, the Army office called Miller's office to say Stamaris will not be temporarily retired.

"Why would they retire a war hero who has done so much for them?" Miller asked.

"We're breathing a big sigh of relief," Stamaris' wife said.

The Army decision is oral — not yet in writing. It didn't go into the reasons. It didn't need to. They are obvious. Why Stamaris had to be put through this wringer is not.

■ Don Hannula's column appears Wednesday on The Times' editorial page.