

Witmer finds love of life, loss of life in Iraq

WITMER, From 1B

member ever to die in combat.

Another sister, Rachel Witmer, served in the same military police unit, while Charity was on duty elsewhere in Iraq with the Waukesha-based Company B of the 118th Medical Battalion.

After Michelle's death, her parents made national headlines by pleading with the military not to order their two remaining daughters back to Iraq — a request the Pentagon ultimately granted.

While fulfilling her National Guard commitment by working at a Milwaukee government clinic screening new Guard enlistees, Charity has begun to piece together a new life for herself.

Living with her parents in their New Berlin house, she is taking classes at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and considering new career options in nursing, psychology and maybe journalism.

Diary shows pain, grief

In a journal called "Charity's Corner," she has begun to write about the pain of losing her twin sister. Posted on the family's Web site, the journal expresses the grief that still simmers deep inside her.

"Getting better? No," she said in an interview at her parents' home. "The pain is just as fresh. But I'm learning how to live with it."

Her fiancé, known to family and friends as Tony Verre, is due back in the United States in February, along with the rest of his National Guard group.

Verre, 25, who grew up in Mukwonago, is a Milwaukee schoolteacher who works in the Guard as a dental technician. He and Charity met through the military, and their relationship continued to blossom once they were deployed to Iraq.

After she returned to the U.S. to grieve with her family, he proposed over the telephone

in June while she was having lunch with her mother and his mother at Merrill Hills Country Club in Waukesha.

"From the moment she left, I was less than myself," Verre wrote in an e-mail to the Journal Sentinel. "I did not want to spend a day more in this life without her."

His mother, Nancy Verre, said the family has been impressed with Charity's strength, maturity and confidence over the past several months.

Iraq call brings tears of joy

Everyone in attendance at Merrill Hills cried tears of joy when Tony interrupted their lunch by reading Charity poetry over the phone and then popping the question.

"They're both very lucky to have found each other," Nancy Verre said. "It's the one bright, bright, bright spot to come out of this past year."

The young couple have not made many plans for the future, other than finding a place to live and maybe getting a dog.

Charity, who turns 21 in February, agreed that the excitement of planning a wedding is tempered somewhat by the absence of Michelle, whom she always assumed would be her maid of honor.

"I just never imagined that she wouldn't be here," Charity said.

Parents in both families have talked about whether the timing is right for a wedding, considering that Charity and Tony both will have recently returned from war and both are still recovering from the trauma of Michelle's death.

But parents always wonder if their children are rushing into marriage, John Witmer said, adding that he is comfortable letting nature take its course.

"That's the power of love," he said. "You just have to get out of the way."