

Mission/'He's with me every step'

► From A-1

Before he knew Herb and Bobbie Samme as friends, Singleton was the Green Bay-based Marine Corps casualty officer assigned to deliver horrible news to their home in Spread Eagle, about two hours north of Green Bay.

On April 2, 2006, the couple's Marine lance corporal son drowned after his truck overturned in floodwaters during an Iraqi supply mission. Searchers did not find his body for nine days.

Losing Eric

Eric Palmisano was one of five children for the Sammes, who married when Eric was a teenager. His biological father had died years earlier, so Palmisano forged a close bond with the man he came to regard as his father.

On the news that Eric was missing in action, Herb Samme asked the Marine Corps if he could go to Iraq and join the search party. The military said no.

Shortly after Eric's funeral, the family received

a sympathy card from KBR Inc., a Texas-based trucking firm. The company is contracted by the U.S. military to service troops in Iraq, and had occasionally worked in partnership with Eric's unit on supply missions.

That was when a light went off in Samme's head: If he could get a job with KBR, maybe he could work in Iraq as a civilian and get close to where his son lived and died.

"I wanted to walk a mile in his shoes," he said.

So the gray-haired father gave up his job hauling plywood to Chicago and applied for a position with KBR.

Samme wanted to reach Iraq by April 2 — the four-year anniversary of Eric's death. He arrived March 20 to begin a one-year assignment as a civilian military contractor.

Bobbie Samme said she and other family members initially were opposed to the idea, because of the danger involved. But she soon realized that her husband was still grieving Eric's loss and that he needed to go to Iraq to find closure.

"I couldn't be more proud of him," she said.

ON THE NET

For information about the nonprofit care package project, go to www.palmisanocarepackageproject.com.

A family duty

The Sammes also honor their son's memory by organizing personal supply shipments to U.S. soldiers overseas under the name Palmisano Care Package Project.

In his new position with KBR, Herb joins about 35,000 employees working in Iraq and Afghanistan on the firm's contract to keep U.S. troops supplied with fuel, water, food and other basics.

"KBR could not provide these services, which allow troops to focus on their combat mission,

without committed employees such as Herb Samme," company spokeswoman Heather Browne said in an e-mail.

Although confidentiality rules prohibit Samme from discussing details of his work, he said his truck-driving job has involved some close brushes with combat action. But he also has achieved the desired sense of picking up where Eric left off.

The father has visited his son's old barracks. He has talked with people who knew Eric. And he has hauled supplies along some of the same routes that Eric drove.

The experience leaves Samme feeling that he has reconnected with his son one last time.

"It feels good — it really does," he said. "He's with me every step of the way."