

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Holiday reunion for Axton siblings both serving in Iraq

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By DOUGLAS HAIRSTON - Bulletin Staff Writer

While millions of Americans observe this Labor Day with back yard picnics and family gatherings, two Axton women will also take a moment to celebrate -- albeit half a world away.

Given the women's occupations, the Labor Day holiday could hardly be a more fitting occasion for their reunion. Both Brescia Cannon Onwusah, 26, and her sister, Chandra Cannon Gravely, 23, are U.S. soldiers stationed amidst the hot, dusty danger of Iraq. Their reunion will come courtesy of their respective commanders, who worked with the U.S. military to arrange the holiday leave after learning of the sisters' dual deployment.

Labor Day, however, will not be the first time the sisters have met in-country. Their first encounter occurred earlier this year, when a grenade attack forced Gravely's supply convoy to detour from its northern trek through Baghdad.

The sisters' mother, Teresa Warren, knows all the details of the meeting, as she has kept in near-constant contact with her daughters since their deployment via e-mails and letters. According to Warren, Gravely, who serves in the Virginia National Guard, first became aware of the grenade attack when loud consecutive blasts shocked the convoy. Gravely told her mother that when she turned to look through the rear window of the truck she was driving, all she could see was black smoke.

Although her company suffered only minor injuries in the assault, the attack forced her convoy to reroute through Baghdad International Airport. For Gravely, the detour was a stroke of luck, allowing her time to search for her sister, an Army personnel specialist stationed at the airport. Onwusah, who knew nothing about the rerouting of the convoy, screamed with delight when her little sister rushed up and embraced her, Warren said. The sisters talked excitedly and had to wonder -- how could two sisters from Axton who had graduated from Laurel Park High School and enlisted in the military years apart end up meeting halfway around the world in the very heart of the Biblical landscape?

According to Warren, the sisters took markedly different paths to meet at the same place. Gravely, who Warren describes as a mix of brawn and beauty, was a cheerleader and ROTC cadet at Laurel Park High School. She inspired her older sister to enlist in the service, Warren said.

Gravely, who has been in Iraq since March, joined the Virginia Army National Guard about four years ago, Warren said, in part to help with her college tuition.

Her departure for Iraq was even more wrenching than normal, as she married Shamain Gravely of Martinsville on Feb. 7, just one day before heading to Fort Eustis to report for active duty. On Feb. 8, she kissed her husband good-bye. One month later, she was deployed

to Iraq.

Gravely is a soldier and is proud of it. She wrote her mother saying, "I have been shot at lots of times. We have been grenaded. But I'm a trained soldier; I know how to deal with these situations."

Onwusah, who arrived in Iraq in May, also left a family behind -- her husband, Paschal, known as "Passy," and two children: Selena, 9, and Emeka, 3. The trio are waiting for her in Germany, where she was stationed prior to her deployment.

According to Warren, Onwusah has found it thrilling to witness the places that figured so prominently in Biblical history, such as the ancient Tigris and Euphrates rivers which used to encompass ancient Mesopotamia.

Onwusah, who always liked trying different foods, once got to order food from an Iraqi restaurant, her mother said. The soldier -- who said she has gotten used to the military's dehydrated-packaged food -- ordered flat bread, lamb, vegetables and pomegranate. She wrote and told her mom it was good but Warren thinks her daughter was just hungry, she said with a laugh.

Onwusha recently wrote her mother, saying, "I know that without family like you and grandma and Passy, I could never make it here. Some people here don't have families to write them, but because of you, I don't know what that's like."

For all the solace that the sisters have derived from their mother and stepfather, Steve Warren, Teresa Warren has gained just as much -- and maybe more.

"I think they have encouraged me more than I have encouraged them," she said of her daughters. Keeping the peace in Iraq has turned out to be more dangerous than waging the war, Warren said. However, the former Hampton Industries employee who recently earned a two-year degree from National Business College said keeping busy helps her not to worry excessively.

At times when she is worried, she said, she will go out and cut the grass or can some more fruits and vegetables. Last week, Warren's yard was well manicured and her kitchen counter was filled with jars of fruits and vegetables.

Warren recalled her anxiousness and her fervent prayers when she saw on the morning news that her daughter's supply convoy had been attacked. But later that day, she got e-mails from her daughters that not only quieted her fears, but brought her joy as the sisters told of their meeting at the Baghdad Airport.

With the military having announced that soldiers will remain in-country for one year, the sisters are not expected to return to their loved ones until at least spring, Warren said.

Their Labor Day reunion, however, could go a long way in assuaging their homesickness pangs. "You hear so much negative stuff about the war," Warren said. "I think it's great that the military would do this."