

## Cost of War, in a Field of Flags

A woman's 5-acre plot is designed to show number of U.S. troops killed in Iraq

At work, Caren Crootof delivers babies. At home, she tends a field devoted to the dead.

Between shifts at her job as a midwife, Crootof plants yellow flags in the field next to her Saratoga County house. Each small square of plastic banquet cloth represents a member of the American military killed in Iraq. Every few weeks, she changes the number on a large sign in the middle of the field. She started with the number 877. That was in the summer of 2004.

Last week the sign read 4,079. But today, Memorial Day, the day set aside to remember fallen troops, Crootof said the sign's total will likely be changed when she checks the U.S. Department of Defense's Web site, which lists battle casualties.

"I never come out here without crying," Crootof said.

Crootof, 55, has no personal connection to the war. She started planting flags after news broke that the Department of Defense would not allow photographs to be published of flag-covered caskets arriving home from Iraq. She saw an interview with a mother and father whose son had been killed and could have been in one of the caskets as it passed a military honor guard standing at attention. "They spoke so eloquently about it. ... It struck me there was a lack of shared grief for the losses in this war," Crootof said.

So began the Route 29 Field Project on five acres. Route 29 is a busy road through the middle of Saratoga County. For drivers traveling west, the scene -- at the intersection with Middle Line Road -- appears suddenly on a bend in the road: green topped by thousands of yellow flags, and in the middle, a stark number set in black and white. There's no explanation, but the symbolism is clear.

The memorial has evoked response from anti-war activists and military members alike, but not everyone appreciates it.

"It's not the best way to honor the war dead. It's more of a protest than the proper rendering of a memorial," said David Bronner, a retired U.S. Army colonel. "To me, it's more respectful to attend the Memorial Day ceremony at the (Gerald B.H. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery) or at Arlington National Cemetery."

Crootof said one soldier wrote her from Afghanistan. He was grateful for the memorial but asked her to include the war dead from "the less publicized war" there. Crootof said that while she thinks a memorial for the dead in Afghanistan should be created, it was the way the government handled the Iraq War and its casualties that prompted her to start the field.

No one has criticized her directly, only offered praise. People write letters or leave notes written on scraps of paper pulled from pockets and placed next to the number:

"Bless you."

"Thank you."

"Support the troops."

"Thank you so much for this labor of love which you have undertaken. I, too, ache with a desire to do something to honor these brave men and women."

A service member in Afghanistan wrote, "There are few people in the world who would take the time out of their day to do something as deliberate and meaningful as what you are doing and I just wanted to let you know that I am touched by it as I know many other people are."

New York Army National Guard Maj. Mathew Tully, 34, who served in Iraq with the 42nd Infantry Division, said the field is part of the reason he is proud to serve his country.

"We're in a great country that allows people to express themselves in various ways," Tully said. Crootof is opposed to the war. Her hybrid car sports several bumper stickers including, "war is not the answer." But she said the field isn't about her views, it is its own entity. She tries to deflect attention away from herself and compares it to her work as a midwife. The attention should be on the baby after a delivery, she said.

As she plants flags, Crootof also thinks of the thousands of wounded warriors and the Iraqi civilians who have died during the war.

The field, powerful in its simplicity, is not simple to maintain. Crootof's close friends and volunteers play a role in the upkeep. Four times each summer, Crootof and her team take all the flags off the field so Aaron, 19, the youngest of her three children, can mow it.

Crootof chose yellow because it signifies support for the troops, and plastic banquet cloth because it would stand up to the elements. The cost is negligible, she said. Crootof's parents, Henry and Virginia

Baker, cut the plastic into short banners, then fold them in half to give the flags more substance. A slim wire serves as the flagstaff.

The Bakers are both in their 80s. The work weighs heavily on Henry Baker, 86, a veteran of World War II who saw action on the ground in France. His eyes fill with tears when he talks about the flag field.

"For me, it's the extended family. It's the mother who wakes up morning after morning and realizes her son or husband is gone," Baker said.

Crootof welcomes strangers to stop and walk through the field, to reflect and remember. Because a tall hedge separates her house from the field, she doesn't usually see the visitors, but she is always moved by the notes they leave.

On Memorial Day two years ago, she heard someone playing taps in the field. Someone else left her a photograph of the field with a caption, "a moment of silence for those who have fallen."

This spring, during the annual clean-up, she found six ragged flags with names written on them and a date. Four read "Ramadi, 3/8." A fifth read "Fallujah, 1/8." Crootof found only a remnant of a sixth flag bearing the words, "I miss you buddy, Teddy."

Usually Crootof throws away tattered flags, but these remains she kept, taped to fresh pieces of banquet cloth. They stand together on a rise in the field, next to the sign.