

# A mother's stars

## Aptos woman has 4 sons serving in Desert Storm

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APTOS — Emma Stephens-Bell has an American flag in her living room window, but only lets four stars show. Each star represents one of her sons serving in the Army in the Persian Gulf.

Staff Sgt. Edmund Stephens, 31, works in communications. Somewhere nearby in the Saudi Arabian desert is his brother, Staff Sgt. Willard Stephens, 30, who also works in communications. On the front lines is Staff Sgt. Christopher Stephens, 27. And Stephens-Bell's "baby," Sgt. Timothy Stephens, 25, is a driver in a transportation company.

Stephens-Bell, switchboard operator at Cabrillo College, said she is at peace, even with four of her six children fighting a war. But she didn't always feel this way.

"At first, I couldn't believe Uncle Sam could send four of my sons," she said. "I got very anxious about it. I couldn't sleep at night. I had stomach problems. I was put on medication for my nerves. And I prayed a lot."

The government can send members of the same



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Emma Stephens-Bell says she's at peace.

family to fight the same war. However, the Sullivan Act, passed into law after World War II, forbids members of the same family to be assigned to the same ship or unit.

Stephens-Bell said her faith in God, plus a video her sons made for her in Germany before they left for the Persian Gulf, put her mind at ease.

# Mother's

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In the video, her sons told her that going to Saudi Arabia is their job. Defending their country, they said, is what they are trained to do. They won't concentrate on death, but concentrate on each day at a time — and take what comes, they promised.

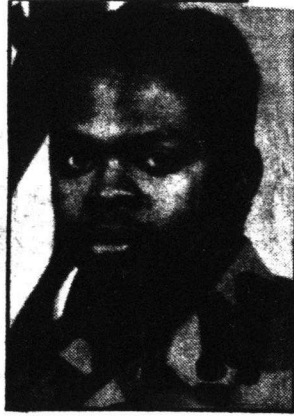
Stephens-Bell now sleeps soundly, and no longer takes medication. "I don't have this sense of burden," she said. "I'm not upset with the president. I don't know where I get this sense of peace. I got it a day before the war started. I prayed that night and decided I would accept the will of God."

Her sons were already in the Middle East, all deployed from Germany. Timothy left in November, Edmund went two days before Christmas, Willard left Christmas Day and Christopher went on New Year's Eve.

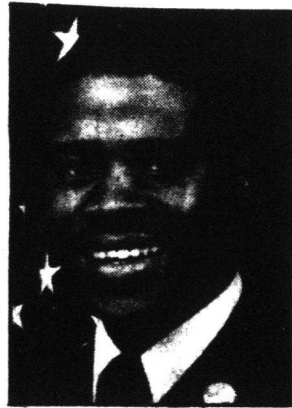
Stephens-Bell said she gets a lot of support from her husband, the boys' stepfather, Johnny Bell. Then there's the support from her friends, who call and write, from co-workers and from her church, the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church.

Her two eldest sons are able to call her because they work in communications; they even see each other occasionally. Christopher writes from the front lines, but letters from Timothy have stopped coming.

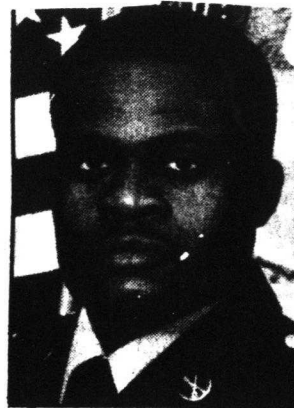
"Their complaints are mostly with sanitation," she said. "Some of the men were getting ill from



Edmund Stephens



Willard Stephens



Christopher Stephens



Timothy Stephens

the toilets they were using. And they mention the sand. They can't get away from the sand. Timothy was moved to a place that had showers. That was the only good thing he could say about it."

All four have been in the service a number of years. The two eldest joined out of high school in Houston, Texas.

"The recruiters came over and they made offers that were very enticing," Stephens-Bell recalled. "The recruiters kept coming over until the boys finally submitted. Timothy and Christopher just followed in their older brothers' footsteps."

Stephens-Bell believes all but the youngest will probably make a career out of the military. Her other son, 28-year-old Michael, is a minister, and her daughter, 25-year-old Drue Antoinette, manages a McDonald's Restaurant. Both live in Houston.

Her daughter thought about joining up, but Stephens-Bell talked

her out of it. "I told her no, I have four already. Plus, I told her she wasn't strong enough. I told her she was spoiled and the military was not a place for a girl who is used to having five brothers look after her."

Stephens-Bell said it is "hogwash" for critics to say that the military is disproportionately made up of minorities, who are sent to fight.

"I don't think the military decided it was going to send minorities from this group or that group," she said. "If the military is 30 percent minorities, than that is how many go. My sons chose this route. They didn't have to."

She was working at Johnson Space Center in Houston at the time and could have helped them through college. But they chose instead to go into the Army, where they are all taking college courses.

"I think it is a good opportunity for them," she said. "They learn a trade and a skill. If they save, they

have money for an extended education. I think it is unfair for someone to volunteer for the military, use Uncle Sam's dollars to support themselves, and then refuse to go and fight."

Stephens-Bell chooses not to believe this war is being fought for oil. She believes Saddam Hussein is as evil as Adolf Hitler and needs to be stopped.

All four of her fighting sons are married, and have seven children among them. One of her grandsons told her that daddy was going to war to die, but Stephens-Bell said she corrected him.

"When I hear people call in on talk shows who have children over there, I really want to talk to them and get them to see it in another light," she said. "There is so much gloom, like they have already lost loved ones. It is like they have no hope."

"There is always hope. You hope for the best and pray for strength to face whatever comes."