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## Maurertown man, 21, dies in insurgent attack in Afghanistan



By Sally Voth (Daily Staff Writer)

MAURERTOWN — A 21-year-old Maurertown man killed in Afghanistan this week passionately believed in his mission, his former Latin teacher said Wednesday.

Army Pfc. Thomas R. Wilson was killed Monday in Paktika, Afghanistan, according to a news release from the U.S. Department of Defense. His unit was attacked by insurgents, the release says.

Wilson was serving with the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team. The battalion's home base is Vicenza, Italy.

His mother, Julie Hepner, said in their last conversation, Wilson told her he was due to fly out of Afghanistan on Sept. 7, and be home two to five days after that.

"It's hard," she said. "He was loved by so many people. He really made a huge sacrifice for us."

Wilson was in Carole DeVoe's Latin classes at Central High School for three years.

"I just loved him," said DeVoe, who retired in June. "He was a considerate person. He was a student leader at all times, very conscientious about what he did.

"I will miss him terribly. He was a very, very important part of my class when he was in it and after he left. I'm really honored to have been his teacher and friend."

Wilson and his cousin gave the Latin class a stuffed cat that became the classroom mascot, DeVoe said.

"It was just an ugly-looking thing," she said.

DeVoe said Wilson had a wonderful work ethic, and "terrific family," which includes sisters Chloe, 22, and Chelsea, 16, and brother, Ethan, 14.

Before going into the Army, Wilson visited her, DeVoe said.

"I believe he whole-heartedly believed he was doing the right thing," she said. "I can't emphasize how much he believed in what he was doing. It's the only comfort that I have."

Classmate and good friend Marty French remembered Wilson as a "good old farm boy."

"He would be there for you any time," said French, breaking into tears. "He's just a good friend."

He and Wilson met in elementary school, and graduated together from Central High School in 2004.

"[I would] go over to the house, spend the night, did everything, drive around, through high school, hang out," French said. "[We were] good buddies. He was there for me, and I was there for him.

"He was an outdoor boy. He liked to go hiking through the woods. He liked hunting, fishing."

In school, Wilson was on the basketball and track teams, he said.

French last saw Wilson about this time a year ago. Wilson had been at basic training in Fort Benning, Ga., when he and a couple of other soldiers came up for the Shenandoah County Fair. He then came back for a couple of weeks before he shipped out to Italy.

The friends kept in touch through MySpace and Facebook. Wilson's friends are struggling with the news of his death, French said.

"They're pretty tore up about it," he said.

Chris Beaune wasn't a friend of Wilson's — he was a "close friend," he emphasized.

They'd known each other since the third grade.

"We would go out exploring," Beaune said. "We explored caves out behind his homestead. We built forts. For like two years, he was over at my house, I was over at his house. He was just always wanting to do something. We used our imagination. He had a hell of an imagination."

The boys raised chickens together.

"He loved nature, every creature," Beaune said. "Say a mosquito landed on him. He wouldn't kill it. He would shoo it off."

Wilson was crazy about where he grew up, according to Beaune.

"His heaven is in the mountains," he said. "He loved the Shenandoah Valley. John Denver's 'Country Roads?' His favorite song, favorite song."

Any future toasts he makes, Beaune said, will be to his old friend.

"If there's one thing I could ever say I learned from this guy, [it would be] common courtesy, and to live each day to its fullest," he said.

Wilson's MySpace page has a picture of himself in uniform. On his page, he says he'd lived in Vicenza, Italy, for the past year, but was currently in Afghanistan.

"Virginia will always be home no matter where I am living," Wilson's page says. "Recalling the Valley brings back memories of my friends and family. Even knowing that most will move away or already have, I will always remember Woodstock for the way it was when I was growing up."

He sends his love to his mother and sisters and brother, and says it's good to hear from old friends.

"Make the effort to not take the small things for granted," Wilson writes.

Messages left on his MySpace page are of love and loss.

"His life was taken while fighting for you and me, a true hero," one says.

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#### **Other heroes lost**

Other Northern Shenandoah Valley residents killed in combat in recent years include:

- Marine Lance Cpl. David Edward Owens Jr., 20, of Frederick County, in Iraq in April 2003.
- Staff Sgt. Craig William Cherry, 39, of Winchester, and Sgt. Bobby E. Beasley, 36, of Inwood, W.Va., both Army National Guardsmen, in Afghanistan in August 2004.