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## In Army-Navy Game, Friends, Competitors and a Band of Brothers

By RYAN GOLDBERG

OLD BRIDGE, N.J. — As Army renews its college football rivalry with Navy for the 109th time Saturday in Philadelphia, Doug Larsen's mind will surely drift back to the game in 2000.

That was when he looked across the line of scrimmage and saw his friend Ronnie Winchester. They were like brothers, having met as freshmen at Chaminade High School, an all-boys Catholic school in Mineola, N.Y., on Long Island. But for a few hours on that day eight years ago in Baltimore, they were rivals, and loving every minute of it.

Throughout the game, Winchester, an offensive lineman for Navy, and Larsen, a defensive lineman for Army, shouted playful insults and exchanged cheap shots. To avoid flags for unsportsmanlike conduct, someone told the referee that they were longtime friends.

"He had to cut block me," Larsen, 29, recently recalled, laughing about the tactic of knocking the legs out from under a defender. "Because he couldn't block me otherwise."

When the game ended — Navy won, 30-28 — the two men hugged at midfield. Neither of them, nor any other player on the field, could have imagined how their lives would change in less than 10 months. Every Army-Navy game since has been played with both academies, including their football players, mobilized for war.

Larsen, now a captain in the Army, returned from his first combat tour in Iraq in April. He had been deployed one year earlier, at a time when few wished to go to Iraq. But for more than two years he had asked for the assignment because of his friend.

Ronald D. Winchester never returned from Iraq. On Sept. 3, 2004, he was killed by a roadside bomb in Anbar Province. It was eight days into his second combat tour. Winchester, 25, of Rockville Centre, N.Y., was the first member of Navy's class of 2001 and the first former Navy football player to be killed in action in Iraq.

More than four years later, Larsen carries the memory of his friend with him every day.

"I still talk to him like he's still around," Larsen said at his home here. "He's kind of still here. We're always talking about him."

The reminders are all around. In his basement he pointed to an oil painting of Winchester above his newly built bar. Winchester's framed white No. 73 Navy jersey rests against a wall. Larsen displayed a large tattoo on

his right shoulder: a war-torn American flag above his friend's initials, the years he lived, and an ace and a deuce of spades (for the card game they loved to play).

Upstairs, Larsen's wife, Michelle, tended to their 19-month-old son, also named Doug. His middle name is Ronald.

"Doug and Ronnie were two of the same type of people," said Winchester's father, Ron. "They were bookends. So seeing Doug now is a lot like seeing Ronnie. That's what helps."

Larsen and Winchester met at football tryouts for high school freshmen, and they solidified their bond in study hall. They were troublemakers, big and brash, but their friendship was based on loyalty. At parties or in fights, of which Larsen said there were plenty, they stuck together.

They entered the academies in the summer of 1997. Before his first semester, however, Larsen left [West Point](#) and transferred to [Hofstra University](#). He played football there for two years but ultimately regretted his decision. He reapplied to West Point, and although the odds were long, he was accepted and again entered as a freshman in 1999.

When Winchester and Larsen played each other the next year, it was their only opportunity. For Winchester, a two-year starter, it was his final game. He graduated in the spring and, as he had hoped, was commissioned a second lieutenant in the [Marines](#). Larsen played the next season for Army and graduated one year after that. By then, his friend was fighting in Iraq.

Winchester commanded an infantry platoon in Charlie Company that led the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 — the tip of the spear, as it was called.

"Ron took to being a platoon commander like a duck to water," Christopher McIntosh, his executive officer and close friend, wrote in an e-mail message. "He knew what to do, when to do it and how to do it."

McIntosh said their company commander frequently relied on Winchester's platoon as the main effort for attacks, in training and in combat.

Back in the United States, Larsen was stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso, and Winchester often called him on a satellite phone, even once during a firefight, Larsen said.

Winchester returned home in October 2003 and split his time between New York and his base at Twentynine Palms, Calif. He spent his last night in the country with Larsen. They partied with friends in the Hamptons and talked about how they would one day live and work together in New York City.

When Winchester returned to Iraq, he immediately expressed his concern about the growing insurgency in e-mail messages to his close friends and family. Then a first lieutenant, Winchester had been assigned the command of a heavy-arms platoon.

On the morning of Sept. 3, 2004, he was out front, guarding a convoy, in his company's first combat patrol. An improvised explosive device was detonated as he and his men crossed a bridge, according to the Defense Department. He and three other Marines were killed. Officials told his family that he had shouted orders to his men even after being hit. He died a few hours later at the base.

Larsen received the news from his father, who had heard from Winchester's mother. Before he and Michelle returned to Long Island for the funeral, Larsen met with his commander. His unit had just returned from Iraq and was not going to return.

He said he told his commander: "My best friend got killed; I need time off. But I want to get sent to Iraq." The commander objected.

More than 1,000 people attended Winchester's funeral, and the Southern State Parkway on Long Island was closed for the procession.

After Larsen returned to Fort Bliss, he continued to ask to be deployed. He got his wish more than two years later. He had to leave his unit and join a military transition team, part of the Army's counterinsurgency campaign. He was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division and sent to Iraq in April 2007.

Larsen left his wife and their son, who was a week old. The war was mired in one of its bloodiest stretches, and he said it was difficult to leave his family. But he considered what Winchester and others had been through.

"Why are those guys going two or three times?" he said. "How can you complain that you've been to Iraq once?"

Larsen spent most of his yearlong mission in Samarra, one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq. He led daily patrols through bombed-out streets and said he often thought of Winchester.

"In Iraq I felt closer to him, more like he was there," Larsen said.

Winchester's parents greeted his return in April with great relief. Larsen said his chances of being sent back to Iraq were slim. His current assignment is as an instructor at Rutgers in the Army R.O.T.C. program.

His other mission, he said, is keeping Winchester's memory alive in a way that celebrates — instead of mourns — his life. That has happened through Larsen's son, with a recently commemorated street where Winchester grew up and in other events and memorials in Rockville Centre; Annapolis, Md.; New York City; Iraq and elsewhere.

"I say don't let him just kind of fade away," Larsen said.

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