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PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

**Jack Kane stopped by Brookdale Cemetery in Dedham on Sunday to visit the graves of his parents, John and Ruth, who both died this year. His father was a veteran of the Korean War. Families across the area are remembering those who lost their lives in combat.**

**By Sarah Schweitzer**

GLOBE STAFF MAY 25, 2015

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Two days before Christmas in 2013, a pair of Marines stood at Erin Vasselian's doorstep in Abington with grim expressions and terrible news. Her husband, Sergeant Danny Vasselian, had been killed by a sniper's shot to the chest while he was patrolling Helmand Province in Afghanistan.

Since that day, Vasselian has searched for ways to honor and remember her high school sweetheart. She helped organize an annual 5K race. She accepted a posthumously awarded Purple Heart Medal and Bronze Star Medal with valor.

On this Memorial Day, Vasselian will join the flow of a Vinyasa class led by her sister at a Braintree yoga studio. Proceeds from the class will go to a memorial fund in Danny Vasselian's name that financially assists veterans and active-duty service members and awards scholarships to Abington High School seniors.

"It's all about remembering him and his sacrifice," said Vasselian, who is 28 and now lives with her sister in Braintree.

For some, Memorial Day is a day of traditions, with comfort taken in their steady and unbending ways. For others, Memorial Day is an improvisation of what feels right.



## **Mass. toll in Iraq, Afghanistan wars**

Since the wars began in 2001 and 2003, 124 US service members from Mass. have died.

## What's open on Memorial Day

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Still for others, it is a day when others join in the grief they feel all the time.

“Every day is Memorial Day for me,” said Barbara O’Neill of Haverhill, whose son Evan O’Neill was 19 when he was killed on Sept. 29, 2003, just four months after deploying with the Army’s 10th Mountain Division.

O’Neill said she thinks of Evan every hour of every day. Her husband, a Vietnam veteran, tortures himself with the unanswerable.

“He can’t understand how he came home and his son was killed,” O’Neill said.

In Haverhill, the city placed a memorial marker outside the family home on North Broadway. A hall was named for him at Veterans Northeast Outreach Center, also in Haverhill.

Recalling her son’s cold nights in Afghanistan, Barbara O’Neill makes quilts in his memory for homeless veterans. His parents also sponsor a scholarship in his name at Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School, where he was an honors student.

Still, the hole remains.

“Memorial Day is just another day. Another day you have to cry,” she said.

In all, 124 servicemen and women from Massachusetts have died in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq since they started in 2001 and 2003, respectively, according to a [Globe review of data](#) collected and compiled by the website [icasualties.org](#).

They hailed from 93 towns and cities and ranged in age from 19 to 52.

The toll on Massachusetts from the wars peaked in 2007, when 21

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*‘Memorial Day is just another day. Another day you have to cry.’*

Barbara O’Neill, whose son Evan was killed in 2003 while deployed with the Army



HANDOUT

**Sergeant Danny Vasselian was killed by a**

military members from the state fell. But there has been at least one death every year since 2001, including this year: Army Specialist John M. Dawson, 22, of Whitinsville died April 8 in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered from small arms fire while on an escort mission.

**sniper's shot to the chest in late 2013 while he was patrolling Helmand Province. Since that day, Erin Vasselian has searched for ways to honor him.**

Across the nation, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have claimed 6,806 service members; another 40,263 were wounded.



KEITH BEDFORD/GLOBE STAFF

**Erin Vasselian (right) and Cindy Bowser (left) have organized a yoga class in Braintree on Memorial Day. The proceeds will go to a memorial fund in Danny Vasselian's name.**

For Nancy Sperry of Gloucester, Monday marks the 10th Memorial Day without her brother, Captain David Connolly, who was killed in a CH-47 Chinook helicopter crash about 80 miles south of Kabul, the Afghan capital.

Her family has rituals for these weekends. They make their way to Bourne, where her brother is buried at the Massachusetts National Cemetery. On Monday, they attend the parade in Gloucester.

But mostly, Sperry focuses on teaching her children — including a daughter who was 10 days old when Connolly died on April 6, 2005 — about her older brother, a Boston prosecutor who served in the Army Reserve's 1173d

## Transportation Battalion in Brockton.

“I can’t explain how much he believed in what he was doing,” Sperry said.

But she tries.



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**A colorful crowd of runners took advantage of the warmer temperatures by participating in the annual Run to Remember in Boston. The run honors law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.**

*Matt Rocheleau of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Sarah Schweitzer can be reached at [sarah.schweitzer@globe.com](mailto:sarah.schweitzer@globe.com). Follow her [@SarahSchweitzer](https://twitter.com/SarahSchweitzer).*

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