



BY
SUZANNA
ANDREWS



PHOTOGRAPHED
BY
DAN WINTERS

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THE MILITARY SAYS HER HUSBAND KILLED HIMSELF. **KIM STAHLMAN**
IS CONVINCED HE WAS MURDERED. AND SHE'S TAKEN ON THE MOST POWERFUL
INSTITUTION ON EARTH IN HER QUEST TO FIND OUT THE TRUTH

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MORE THAN seven years later, Kimberly Stahlman still remembers almost every detail about the telephone call that marked the end of her life as it was. “They called my cell phone. At 5:30 in the morning,” she says, sitting in the breakfast room of her home near Greenville, South Carolina. It is 100 degrees outside; the blinds are closed, to keep the house cool—“Southern style,” she says, in a drawl that has an echo of country in it.

All around are traces of her old life. In the foyer, there is a family photo—two little girls sitting on a porch swing with their parents: Kim, her blonde hair cut in a bob; Mike, dark haired and sharp featured. In the background, Spanish moss drips from the trees; everyone is barefoot. The photo was taken at their home in Beaufort, South Carolina, when Mike was commander of the First Battalion at the Marine Corps base at Parris Island and Kim served as president of the Parris Island Officers’ Spouses Club.

There are also signs of her life as it has become—plastic file boxes open on the living room floor, documents spread out on the carpet in front of the huge fireplace, between the green and aqua sofas, and in her study upstairs. Witness statements, forensic photographs, ballistics and blood-spatter analyses. Thousands of pages.

Her husband was on a yearlong tour of duty in Iraq when the call came, on July 31, 2008. According to the Marine on the phone, Mike had been found in his bunk at Camp Ramadi at 8:45 that morning, with a bullet wound to his head, and it appeared he had shot himself. Alive but unresponsive, he was

being transported to Bethesda Naval Hospital. He never regained consciousness. Colonel Michael Ross Stahlman was 45 years old when he died two months later, on October 5, the day before his 21st wedding anniversary. He was one of the highest-ranking officers to die in the Iraq War.

Almost from the moment she’d answered the phone that day, Stahlman “knew that something was very wrong,” she says. The details didn’t add up: How, for example, did a right-handed man manage to shoot himself just above his *left* temple? In search of answers, she made calls, wrote letters and met with military investigators, congressional staffers and her senator, Lindsey Graham. She also brought together a team of her own forensic, medical and legal experts in what is now an ongoing crusade to get the military to reopen the investigation into Mike’s shooting, an investigation that she believes was critically flawed. In the process, Stahlman, 49, has taken on possibly the most powerful institution in the world—the U.S. military—and has come up against what she calls “the wall of brass.”

Stahlman has been dismissed as a widow in denial about her husband’s suicide. She has been shunned by former Marine Corps friends. A government investigative report referred to her as unable to “give up her ‘martyrdom’” and accept that she contributed to her husband’s death. To supporters, who include Stuart Bowen, the former special inspector general for Iraqi reconstruction, she is a brave woman of great strength, fighting for the truth about her husband’s death and also about the deaths of dozens of others, through Military Families for Justice (MFFJ), an organization she cofounded.

At a time when the U.S. is locked in a seemingly perpetual war, allegations of vast corruption are emerging, shining light not only on what war does to soldiers but also on how the U.S. military treats its own. Department of Veterans Affairs scandals have made headlines, as has the crisis level of posttraumatic stress disorder among veterans, which appears to have contributed to an epidemic of military suicides. There were 288 confirmed or suspected suicides among active-duty personnel in 2014, according to Department of Defense (DOD) statistics. These

deaths, along with fatalities from accidents, illness, friendly fire and homicides, are classified as “noncombat” or “nonhostile.” A 2010 Virginia Commonwealth University analysis of DOD data found that about 21 percent of the 5,790 military deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2002 had been classified this way. But among those non-hostile deaths, 5 percent hang in limbo, listed as “undetermined” or “pending.”

The case of Pat Tillman, the NFL player who joined the Army after 9/11, is the most famous one in which the military concealed the true circumstances of a soldier’s death, the Army originally reporting that he died in combat and later acknowledging he was killed by friendly fire. But there are others. Today, according to estimates by MFFJ, there are at least 166 known cases of families who have questions about the deaths of their relatives.

Tracy Shue, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and nurse who cofounded MFFJ, says most families who challenge the military become so exhausted and traumatized by the struggle, they give up within two years. Which seems to be what the military hoped would happen to Kim Stahlman. “I think they thought that because I was petite and blonde and from the South, I was just going to go away,” she says.



KIMBERLY TYLER WALTERS was born and raised in Darlington, South Carolina, the second of Bob and Shirley Walters’s five children. Her father was a police officer. Money was so tight, her mother worked two jobs, as a receptionist and a teacher’s aide.

Her parents, she says, had a “turbulent relationship.” They divorced and remarried—and today live just a few miles from Stahlman, having moved nearby to help her after she was widowed. But that period when she was a girl was especially difficult. “I didn’t have much of

a childhood,” she says. The first member of her immediate family to go to college, Stahlman wanted to become a criminal psychologist, she says, but soon decided “it wasn’t practical” and shifted her major to finance.

Michael Stahlman came from a different world. His father worked for the U.S. State Department. »

WALL OF BRASS
Stahlman was rebuffed, even shunned, after she challenged the military’s ruling about her husband’s death: “It was like I got leprosy.”





**THEY WERE LIKE THE THELMA AND LOUISE OF DEATH
INVESTIGATION. THEY COMBED THROUGH
MIKE'S JOURNAL. THEY IDENTIFIED THE NCIS'S WITNESSES,
A PAINSTAKING PROCESS OF
DECIPHERING HEAVILY REDACTED STATEMENTS.**



The youngest of three children, Mike grew up in India, Jordan, Panama and Chevy Chase, Maryland. That is where I knew him; our families were neighbors. Handsome, with penetrating gray eyes and a dazzling smile, he was the picture, my brother recalls, of “the classic all-American guy—really nice, very confident, *very* decent.” That description would be echoed, years later, by those who knew him in the military. He was, as one Marine would describe him to agents for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) after the shooting, “a breath of fresh air” and “a real solid guy.” “He had a sterling reputation,” says Colby Vokey, who was, like Mike, a Marine Corps lawyer, or judge advocate general (JAG). He was “not closed-minded, which kind of set him apart,” adds Vokey, noting that Mike was a triathlete. Before he died, he had been training for the Ironman.

Mike attended the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland; did Marine basic training at Quantico, Virginia; then went to the naval flight-training school in Pensacola, Florida. He was visiting South Carolina in April 1987, for an air show, when he and Kim met in a nightclub. After a childhood with so much family stress, Stahlman says, she “never wanted to be married, never wanted children.” But when she met Mike, she “just *knew*.” They were married by a justice of the peace six months later.

The years and the towns flew by. Mike served as navigational officer on the Phantom RF 4B, the storied photo-reconnaissance jet. He went to law school in a program funded by the military, and then to the JAG school at the University of Virginia, where he also

taught criminal law. Mike “*loved* teaching,” says Stahlman, and he planned to return to it once he retired in 2011. He and Kim moved almost every other year while she finished her degree, worked in finance and office management, then got an M.Ed. in counseling. In Okinawa, Stahlman worked with the Marine Corps family advocacy office and set up its victim advocacy program. That was her first close look at the darker side of military life. She dealt with sexual-assault and spousal-abuse cases—“mostly rapes,” she says. “Marine on Marine.”

When her first child, MacKenna, was born in 1997, the family was posted at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The couple’s second child, Piper, was born in 2004, when they were stationed at Parris Island. Stahlman says she loved the Marine Corps. “I thought it was supportive; the wives were supportive. It’s just a completely different lifestyle. It’s hard, but it’s also a good life. I never had to worry about my husband being laid off. I loved the people. I got to go to a lot of places. Oh, I bitched about it; we all did. But I don’t think I would trade that experience. Ever. And I knew that Mike *loved* it.”



IN 2006, Mike was transferred to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, California. Promoted to full colonel the next year, he was the staff judge advocate, or the general’s lawyer. It was an unusually busy time. “We had the Haditha war crimes [trials] going on,” Vokey recalls, referring to the killing of 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians, including children,

by a group of Marines. There were other trials, says Vokey, who was chief of the Marine Corps’s defense lawyers in the western U.S. before he retired in 2008. The base was also busy deploying people to Afghanistan and Iraq. “The only thing that Mike and I ever argued about was he didn’t spend enough time with the family,” says Stahlman.

Her husband asked to be sent to Iraq. He was eligible for retirement, but he had never been deployed in a combat zone. “I think that he felt like, if I retire as a colonel and I don’t do this, that’s a box I haven’t checked,” says Stahlman. “I could not say no.”

“You will see that with lots of Marines and soldiers,” says Vokey. War “is what you’ve been trained to do, and this is your opportunity.” Mike was appointed Multi National Force West Rule-of-Law Coordinator, helping to oversee the rebuilding of Iraq’s legal system. According to the complaint in a 2013 lawsuit Stahlman filed against the Defense Department, the Navy, the NCIS, the Marine Corps and the Armed Forces Medical Examiner (AFME), Mike oversaw dealings with U.S. and Iraqi detention facilities and “interactions” among Iraqi police, judges and prosecutors. He also “was involved in internal base criminal investigations.” These included cases of corruption involving American soldiers and contractors.

It was a difficult time for Mike to leave the family—which would be reflected in the email correspondence between the couple that NCIS investigators would later pull off the server and scrutinize. By the time they got to Twentynine Palms, Stahlman had begun to feel ill—everything hurt, “even my *skin*,” she recalls. She was eventually diagnosed with fibromyalgia and hemochromatosis, a blood disorder. And she suffered from blinding migraines, which ran in her family. Stahlman’s illnesses and medications would become part of the investigation after a former friend, another officer’s wife, told NCIS agents, in two spectacularly toxic interviews, that the couple had a “seriously dysfunctional marriage,” describing Kim as a self-centered, pill-popping woman who was barely able to cope. Although the Marine Command report on the shooting concluded that the couple’s emails did not reflect any exceptional marital discord, it was testimony like this, says Stahlman, that led investigators to believe that her ailments and “issues,” as one witness

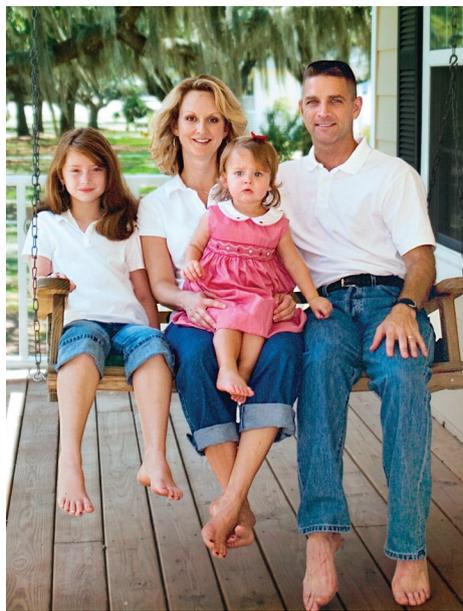
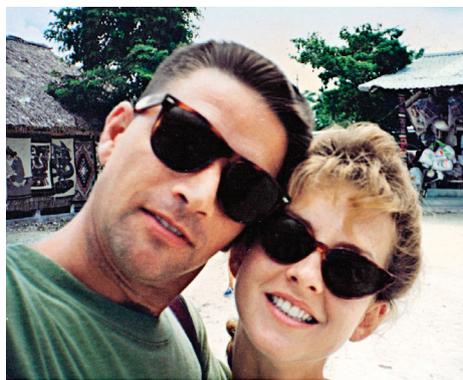
described them, were partly what drove her husband to shoot himself: “They have basically given *me* as the reason.”



ON THE evening before the shooting, Mike called from Iraq. He spoke to his wife, his daughters and his nephews. He was coming home on leave in a month, in time for Piper’s fourth birthday, and everyone was excited. Ten-year-old MacKenna wanted her father to take her to the water park. He’d agreed. “I LOVE YOU SOOOO MUCH TOO!!! The water park sounds great,” he’d emailed her three days earlier. According to Stahlman, the call took place around 2 PM on the East Coast—9 PM in Iraq. Sometime between 9 and 10 that night, according to an NCIS witness statement, a Marine said Mike stopped to talk with him as he left his office. “He said he couldn’t wait to go on leave,” the statement said. “I specifically remember him saying he couldn’t wait to hug his kids. His demeanor that night was exactly like he always was.”

Mike was seen the next day, sometime between 4:30 and 5:35 AM, by another Marine. He stopped by the office, dressed in his work-out clothes, suggesting that he exercised that morning, as he usually did. He greeted that Marine, asked him how *his* home leave had been, then left. When Mike did not show up at 8:30 AM for a scheduled convoy to an Iraqi village, people were baffled. He was extremely punctual. A sergeant was sent to look for him at his quarters. He found the door to the trailer unlocked. According to this man’s statement, the lights were off, the air conditioning seemed to be on, and the sheet from the top bunk bed had been pulled down, like a curtain—something often done to keep out the light. There was blood on the floor. Lifting the sheet, the sergeant found Mike Stahlman lying on the lower bunk.

His head was tilted to the left. He was lying on his back, and according to one witness, his body was also leaning to the left, with the knees drawn slightly up. His left arm was twitching uncontrollably. His service pistol, a Beretta 9 mm, was lying on his left side, near—or just under—his waist, with the barrel neatly pointed toward his feet. He had been shot above the left temple, and the bullet had traveled down and forward, exiting near his right cheekbone. According to witness statements, on Mike’s right side, on the



A LIFE IN SERVICE From top: The Stahlmans at a U.S. Marine Corps ball in Camp Lejeune, 1997. A couple’s selfie taken while they explored Okinawa, circa 1995. At home on the Parris Island base, with daughters MacKenna (left) and Piper. Stahlman says the girls, now 18 and 11, have encouraged her to keep fighting for answers.

bed, was a Bible inscribed by his wife, “To Mike, From his girls,” and a keychain that held a photograph of Piper and MacKenna.

The presumption, from the moment he was discovered, was that Mike had tried to kill himself. The central evidence the military cited was the presence of his gun at his side, the match between the gun and a bullet that had gone through the wall of the trailer and into the housing unit next door, and the Bible and keychain next to him on the bed. As to motive, one report noted that although Mike had displayed no sign of depression, “no outward indication of stress” in Ramadi, he had seemed less easygoing than usual and “preoccupied” in the two or three days before the shooting. The Marine Command report concluded that he had become overworked as a result of staff reductions and, because he was “driven and disciplined,” he didn’t have anyone to turn to when “he started to feel lost and without hope for recovery,” although, as Stahlman points out, a senior officer subsequently asked to “clarify” his earlier statement to indicate that Mike was *not* unusually overworked.

There was also the email. At 5:29 the morning of the shooting, an email was sent from Mike’s account: “Kim, sorry about what you are about the [sic] find out. I love you and always will. You and the girls are the best thing that ever happened to me. Love, Mike.” But the computer logs gathered by the NCIS were confusing, indicating that the email was time-stamped after the sender had logged off. According to Stahlman’s April 2015 petition to the Board for Corrections of Naval Records (BCNR) requesting that the suicide ruling be overturned, whether Mike “sent the email is itself in doubt.”

Stahlman had always suspected something was wrong in the official account. Mike was right-handed, as she told the Marine who called that morning, before she collapsed and her father took the phone from her hand. She was at Mike’s bedside at Bethesda Naval when she first told the NCIS that she wanted the agency to “preserve everything” because she was going to commission her own investigation. The bedding, in particular, was critical evidence. But as she would later learn, the blood-soaked sheets, pillows and mattress were destroyed within 48 hours of the shooting. Other odd details would come to light. An unidentified silky white cloth, apparently with CONTINUED ON PAGE 118

THE WIDOW'S WAR

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 105 blood spatter and gunshot residue on it, was found near the bed. Mike's helmet bag, which he used as his briefcase, was missing. His hands were not tested for gunshot residue, which would have indicated whether he'd fired the gun. The Bible and keychain were never tested for fingerprints. The gun, the bullet casing and the bullet that had gone through the wall were eventually tested, but "no latent prints suitable for identification" were found.

Harking back to her college days, when she was still studying criminal psychology, Stahlman spent the months after Mike's death poring over forensics texts. With the help of her father, the retired cop, she tried to recreate the shooting; at one point, she stood in the field behind her parents' house and fired a Beretta 9 mm through a pig's head, to see if it would emerge intact, as did the bullet that NCIS said had gone through Mike's skull and then the wall of his bunk. "Couldn't do it," says Bob Walters. Stahlman has been shooting since childhood. She says she understood how difficult it would have been—just given the length of a Beretta's barrel—for Mike to shoot himself in the temple with his non-dominant hand. It is possible but rare: About 8 percent of suicides do so, according to one 2007 pathology text and an older study the NCIS itself cited in an internal document. And shooting oneself in the left temple with one's nondominant hand happens even more rarely, according to a 2012 study.

What stunned Stahlman was how soon after Mike's death people turned their backs on her. The wives who had once been friends stopped returning her calls. Even the JAGs, Mike's colleagues, avoided her. Only retired ones like Colby Vokey stepped forward. "It was like I got leprosy," she says.

"There is a hierarchy of grief," says Cilla McCain, a close friend of Stahlman's and a cofounder of MFFJ. And suicides—considered "dishonorable" by many in the military, according to Tracy Shue—lie at the bottom. But as McCain would later hear from Mike's fellow soldiers at Ramadi, NCIS agents had suggested to some people that he was distraught because his wife was going to leave him—which Stahlman says was untrue. But it provided another reason for her to be shunned. "That bitch drove a fine Marine to kill himself," one former officer told McCain.

"My savior," Stahlman calls McCain, who

is the author of the 2010 book *Murder in Baker Company*, about the killing of an Army private by fellow soldiers. The two women met several months after Mike's death, in an online forum for military families similarly seeking answers. They decided to work together on a book about Mike, tentatively titled *A Non Hostile Incident*.

With McCain on board, Stahlman's campaign went into high gear. They were like the Thelma and Louise of death investigation. They spoke every day, scoured witness statements, traveled to Washington, talked to lawyers, combed through Mike's journal and his legal cases. They identified the NCIS's witnesses, a painstaking process of deciphering heavily redacted statements, and McCain started calling them. "A lot of people would talk to me who would not speak to Kim," says McCain, "because no one wants to make a widow cry, especially men."

In early 2011, Stahlman got the first independent confirmation that Mike's death may not have been a suicide. Michael S. Maloney, a retired senior forensic consultant and NCIS special agent, had offered to review the NCIS's report—pro bono—"to help bring her closure," he says. Maloney, who had also been a government expert witness in the Haditha trials, was almost certain that Mike had committed suicide, and his initial review of the evidence suggested that while it would have been difficult for him to shoot himself, it was possible. But Maloney also noticed that photographs of the shooting scene that should have been included with the documents Stahlman received in response to her Freedom of Information Act requests weren't there. He helped her refile her request. What she got several months later were almost 200 digital images, which Maloney would break apart, pixel by pixel, to analyze for blood spatter, bullet trajectory and "anomalies" at the scene. What Maloney concluded, after nearly a year of analysis, was that there were "clear indications that this crime scene was staged," he says.

Perhaps the most dramatic aspect of his analysis involved blood spatter. Maloney saw from the photographs that it was present on Mike's bedside table. If the sheet had indeed been hanging down from the upper bunk—as it was when he was discovered—it would have been between Mike and the table when the bullet entered Mike's head. And

it should have been marked with spatter on the side facing Mike. But it wasn't. The blood spatter was on the *other* side of the sheet, suggesting that the sheet had been tucked under the bunk above—the blood spattering upward onto it when Mike was shot—and then lowered afterward. Also a shooting-reconstruction expert, Maloney discovered that the path the blood had taken was not aligned with the trajectory of the bullet that had gone through the wall. This suggests, he says, that two bullets were fired: one that penetrated the wall and one that passed through Mike's skull and lodged in the mattress. Which had been destroyed by NCIS agents before it could be examined. According to their statement, this was done on orders of the base "command" on the grounds that the bedding was "contaminated."

It was Maloney's analysis that convinced Colby Vokey, for one, that Mike had not shot himself. Stuart Bowen had not needed as much persuading when Stahlman called him to ask for help in 2011. "This was not the first questionable suicide that I had run into," he says, referring to the 2005 death in Iraq of Army Colonel Theodore Westhusing, whose case bears some striking similarities to Mike's. But it was Maloney's report that strengthened the former special inspector generals' belief that Mike Stahlman did not commit suicide, and raised the possibility, says Bowen, that "he may have been murdered."

Yet no one in the military seemed to want to hear the evidence. Stahlman's call to the Armed Forces Medical Examiner in the spring of 2011 asking for a meeting to discuss Maloney's findings set off a flurry of emails at NCIS belittling both Maloney and Stahlman. One called her a "wife who now believes/pre-tends [she had] a storybook marriage."

That June three pathologists from the AFME did look at Maloney's report and dismissed it in a two-and-a-half-page memo that ignored Maloney's blood-spatter analysis, among other issues. "Many of the findings have multiple possible interpretations and it is not possible for anyone who did not actually witness the event to opine with certainty on a specific scenario," the report concluded. Despite this remarkable acknowledgment of how difficult it was to nail down exactly what had happened in Mike's bunk that day, the AFME reaffirmed the suicide ruling.

Late in 2011, Stahlman was finally invited to meet with the senior officials at NCIS. She traveled to Washington with her father. Maloney joined them, flying in from Kansas, prepared to present his findings at NCIS's headquarters in Quantico. But shortly before the appointed time, Stahlman was informed that NCIS would not permit Maloney to attend the meeting. She was also told she could not bring her attorney. Only her father would be allowed to accompany her. "We walked in," Stahlman recalls, "me and my dad, and there were seven of them," including a two-star general. As her father relates, Stahlman kept asking for a copy of every test that the officials said they had performed but which she had never seen. She got nowhere. "I said, 'Kim, don't you think we've heard enough of this bullshit?'" recalls Bob Walters. "Let's go." And they walked out.



FOR KIM STAHLMAN, at this point, there is no question that her husband was murdered. Like Stuart Bowen and Colby Vokey, she believes he may have been killed because of something he uncovered. Mike, says Bowen, was working in Anbar province, one of the most dangerous places in Iraq in 2008. "Corruption was widespread, and that was something he knew about," says Bowen. "Mike had raised some concerns in his notes about [it]. And I'm sure he raised questions."

Whether the government investigation was careless, incompetent or deliberately a cover-up is not clear. What seems plain is that the military took the easy way out. "Suicide clears the books," Shue speculates. "It's easier than a homicide for the command." Asked to comment about such details as the missing helmet bag and the absence of fingerprint tests on the Bible and keychain, as well as the reasons Mike's bedding was destroyed before it was examined, the NCIS declined. As for Maloney's forensic analysis, an NCIS spokesman told *More* it was "conclusively disproved by [NCIS's] exhaustive analysis of the evidence," and he reiterated the agency's conclusion that Michael Stahlman had died of a "self-inflicted wound."

That suicide ruling is a "manifest injustice," according to Stahlman's filing to the BCNR. She is asking to have it overturned

and for a "swift, thorough and competent investigation" of Mike's death, says her lawyer, Paul Kiyonaga, adding that if the ruling doesn't go in her favor, they will "pursue every available avenue for legal redress."

Wherever that battle takes her, Stahlman will continue her work with Military Families for Justice. The organization is trying to get legislation passed that would give families a forum in which to hear, and challenge, the military's findings in death investigations. MFFJ also acts as a source of information for families, who often have no idea what action to take. Stahlman would like to create a fund and a network of expert volunteers to help relatives with costs and legal and forensic advice. "I know Mike would want me to be of service, and I think it would be in something dealing with helping the military be a better place," she says.

Even now, seven years later, Kim Stahlman still finds herself looking into crowds, at runners or bicyclists, expecting to see him. "Mike loved the Marine Corps so much," she says, her eyes brimming. "And I feel like they just threw him away." ☹

SUZANNA ANDREWS is a contributing editor at *More* and *Vanity Fair*. She is based in New York.

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