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Elaine Abraham and her family are proud - and worried- over George "Boss" Ramos, Jr., her son in Lebanon. With Abraham is her two daughters, Judy and Charmaine Ramos, her son, David Ramos, and her two granddaughters, Melody and Nirvana.

Life with a son in Lebanon

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

"Try 37!" Charmaine Ramos urges her mother as the shelling and burning of Beirut, Lebanon, is replaced on the television screen by a newscaster telling how an "unfortunate" remark by James Watt has just angered blacks, Jews, women and the handicapped.

Quickly, Elaine Abraham flicks the channel and there is news, but it is the wrong news. "Try 19!" Judy Ramos, her other daughter suggests. On Channel 19, the family is suddenly taken aboard a U.S. ship sitting off Lebanon's coast.

The camera sights down the barrel of a big gun toward the

shoreline, where shells from such guns have been raining on Syrian and Druze Moslem strongholds.

The scene changes, showing a young man with hair cropped so close his skull practically shines. "He's a Marine!" Charmaine laughs. There is a worried pride in her voice.

Nirvana, Charmaine's three-year-old daughter, crawls onto Elaine's lap. "Look," Elaine points out the marines to her granddaughter. "Look for your Uncle Boss!"

For untold millennia, mothers and daughters have been sending their sons and brothers off to fight in wars and conflicts, many of them hard to understand, in places far from their homes. Now, thanks to

24-hour, on-the-spot-live-as-it-happens cable T.V. news channels, they can sit in a living room in Anchorage, Alaska and watch the action unfold.

And thus it is that Elaine, her two daughters, her son David, his wife, Dorinda, and Elaine's two grandchildren find themselves watching more television than ever. They want to know and to understand what is happening to "Boss" — George Ramos, Jr., a marine who will never be just a newsroom statistic to them.

"At 2 in the morning here, it is already afternoon over there," Charmaine notes. "One of us is always getting up at 2 to turn on the television and find out what is going on."

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"Boss" Ramos now in Marines in Lebanon

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Although Charmaine laughs as she says it, there is worry in this household. "Boss" may be on board a ship now and away from the greatest danger, but four U.S. Marines have been killed already. Several more have been injured, and President Ronald Reagan and the U.S. Congress seem to be preparing themselves and America's conscience for at least an 18-month stay.

Although the marines are officially part of a four-nation "peacekeeping" team sent to Lebanon to help keep order in that civil-war torn country, the combat role of the U.S. is steadily increasing. "Boss" is part of a 2,000-member fighting contingent of men on board U.S. ships, waiting to back up the 1,200 marines on shore, who frequently find themselves under attack.

Between newscasts, the family speaks with much pride and affection of their son and brother.

"George always wanted to go into the service," Elaine remembers with a smile. "When he was a little boy, he was always asking for G.I. Joes. I used to get him G.I. Joes. I taught him how to knit. After that, he would knit sleeping bags for the G.I. Joes."

Before joining the marines at the age of 22, "Boss" attended Anchorage Community College and earned a certificate in auto mechanics. Elaine says she is still surprised that he waited so long to enlist. Perhaps it was because of her own attitude toward Viet Nam, she speculates.

"I was very turned off by that war," she explains. "I just felt it was a needless loss of American life, and they died horrible deaths over there in a foreign country. I guess I was very verbal about my feelings of the Viet Nam war."

That war struck close to home. Boss' cousin — considered a brother in the traditional Tlingit way — came home from marine duty in Viet Nam severely wounded. His right arm atrophied and his shoulders were weak.

When his fishing boat overturned within sight of the Yakutat home where his mother and her family were staying, he did not have strength to save himself. He and his fiancée drowned. His family witnessed the tragedy.

"Boss" had been very close to the cousin, Ralph Johnson. "You know, in the Tlingit way, we believe in reincarnation," Elaine explains. Ralph had had a brother who called himself "Boss." This was a shortened version of his Tlingit name which he could not pronounce. This "Boss" drowned in an accident before Elaine's oldest son was conceived.

"There was a woman in Yakutat who told me I was carrying the reincarnation of Boss before I was even sure I was pregnant," Elaine recalls. After George Jr., was born, Ralph's



Elaine Abraham and granddaughter Nirvana watch a program featuring an interview with Druze Moslems, Americans, and Lebanese. With family in a war zone, the news has taken on new meaning.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

family took to him as though he were Boss, and the name stuck. Ralph was truly his brother.

"When Ralph talked to Boss, he told him that no matter what had happened to him in Viet Nam, he was still proud he had served," Elaine recalls. "He was proud he was able to uphold the honor of the U.S. Marine Corps, even though Viet Nam was bad."

"He felt the honor, pride, and discipline he learned in the Marines would have been good training for him for whatever he would do in life if he hadn't been so badly wounded."

After Ralph died, the family learned that he had received a number of medals for his service in Viet Nam, including the Purple Heart, the Presidential Unit Citation with

Ribbon Bar, the Republic of Viet Nam Unit Citation Gallantry Cross with Palm, and several other awards.

Elaine admits that she was "upset" when Boss told her he had joined up, but on his very first "float" she received a letter from a Catholic priest in Thailand which made her very proud of her son.

The Father told her how Boss' ship, the U.S.S. Peleliu had docked at the Thai port of Pattaya after three months at sea. As could be expected, "our little town was jumping with juke boxes at full blast... most men just thought about themselves and had a good time."

"However, George was one of the few men who were different," the priest wrote, explaining how Boss had spent

his time on shore working in an orphanage helping the orphaned and abandoned children to have a better life.

The priest was proud. Elaine was proud. "He's not even Catholic!" she laughs. "He's Protestant! It's just amazing to think of, this big, tall Tlingit Indian helping to take care of those foreign orphans! He was telling me that when he gets out, he would like to adopt about 12 of them, so that he could bring them home and we could help raise them," she says.

"He spent a lot of time trying to teach them English. He drew pictures to try and show them how far away he had come from. The only thing they could think of was Eskimos. They had some sense of Eskimos."

Since then, Boss has kept in touch and has helped raise funds for the orphans. He was looking forward to stopping there again this tour, but went to Lebanon instead.

"That was one of his favorite ports," Elaine says. "Australia is another one."

"Yea," adds Judy, "but for a different reason!"

"Boss says the Australians are the most friendly people," Elaine explains. "They actually line up at the ships, and bring Americans home to have supper with them, and to take the American boys around."

With a little help from Judy, Elaine tells how Boss is shy, so he hung back from all this attention. He did, however, go to a "pub," get drunk, and took to dancing on a table which he promptly fell off of.

Two Australian girls picked him up from the floor and took him home with them, where their families cared for him for four days. They took him around and showed him the sights.

"Oh, he loved the zoo!" Elaine says.

This family can talk forever about their son and brother. He is a team leader of a four-man machine gun crew. After firing a certain number of rounds at such high speed, the muzzle of the machine gun gets extremely hot and must be removed and replaced.

"It is so hot, the other team leaders have to use something to protect their hands," Judy says. "Boss just tears it off with his bare hands. He says he doesn't want to waste seconds to give the enemy any advantage."

"Other men want to be on his team," adds Charmaine.

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George "Boss" Ramos on board ship.

A Marine in Beirut

"One said Boss could help keep him alive."

There is also the story of how impressed a commander of Boss' was that in training in Africa, with temperatures pushing 115 degrees, this young man from the cool rain forests of Alaska performed adds his mother.

Why should an Alaskan face the possibility of injury and death in a foreign country's civil war? Few Americans can even truly say what the fighting in Lebanon is all about.

"I don't like his being there," Elaine says. "I don't believe it is a good enough reason. The politicians should have taken a little bit more time before doing this. President Reagan should have done a little more research in what was really involved before sending in American boys.

"I think the president should sit down and think these things through a little more." Most of all, Elaine says she is upset with the Israelies, for pulling back from strategic mountain positions and giving the enemy a good place from which to rain shells down on U.S. Marines.

As she talks, a silent message flashes onto the television

screen. "Today, there are 40 wars raging in the world. The U.S. is involved in nearly half of them."

Elaine may not like the war, but she is proud of her son, and supports his decision to be a marine.

Boss' brother David has been quiet throughout the evening. At the door, he speaks up. "I wish I could be there with him," he says, as his toddling daughter Melody grips his lower pant leg and stands wobbly beside him. "He's got an obligation to his country. I think it's neat he'll do it. I just wish I could be with him." better than soldiers from the desert states of Texas and Arizona.

They speak of the cottage he arranged for them to be with him during different visits to Hawaii and how with Elaine's mother, Suzy Abraham, Charmaine and Nirvana, there were four generations of family there.

Other Marines had no family nearby, and little family contact. "They can take just about everything," Judy refers to the hardships faced by the marines, "except loneliness."

Elaine found herself with 30 "sons" in Hawaii, all short-haired marines who would

come by to eat, watch tv, and just sit and think.

The subject slow to come up in this conversation is the danger faced by Boss or any other marine stationed in Lebanon. But with four dead marines that subject is closest of all to the family's heart.

"Boss always wanted to go. He had his heart set on the Marines. I can accept that," Elaine says. "But I thought I was free from this worry because he wears big, thick glasses. He can hardly see without them.

"When I'm upset, when I'm crying, it's because I'm afraid he might lose those glasses. How would he be able to see the enemy? I'm not crying over anything else."

Boss has told them of the poor condition much of the marines' equipment is in. He was on a ship off Iran during the Iranian hostage crisis, and said he was not surprised that President Carter's helicopter rescue failed. The equipment was just too ill kempt.

That worries the family.

"What he wrote to me," says Judy, "both he and his best buddy said, 'we will take a lot of casualties' if things don't improve."

"He's not safe, I know,"