

Michael Rahilly

By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow



Michael Rahilly never expected to meet an American POW in a Saudi desert. But that chance encounter during the Gulf War became a lasting friendship and one of many defining moments in his life of service.

Raised in East Fishkill by parents deeply involved in local volunteer work, Michael joined the U.S. Army after high school, served during Operation Desert Storm, and returned home to build a career in law enforcement, serving the very community where he grew up.

FAMILY ROOTS

Michael's parents, the late Joseph and Betty Rahilly, moved to Hopewell Junction from Westchester County in 1970. Both volunteered with the East Fishkill Fire District (EFFD) and Rescue Squad. Joseph, a U.S. Marine and Navy veteran who served in the Korean War, also served on the East Fishkill Planning Board and was active in the St. Denis-St. Columba parish. Betty was a life member of the parish's Altar Rosary Society. They raised Michael and his two older sisters, Kathleen and Aileen, in East Fishkill. Kathleen still lives locally and has a son currently serving in the U.S. Navy.



Photos courtesy of Michael Rahilly

Sergeant Michael Rahilly of the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office, where he's served for 25 years, stands in front of his many commendations. He now oversees nine SROs serving 21 schools across Dutchess County.

"I did not feel ready for college and had been raised to have great respect for the military," Michael says. "It was something I needed to do." He enlisted after high school and served for five years, including deployments during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm.

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He enjoyed being an SRO himself, in Pawling, after working as a patrol officer for many years.



During Desert Storm, he became friends with American POW Shant Kenderian, who later would write a book, *1001 Nights in Iraq*, about his capture that includes Michael. These photos appear in the book.



Home after basic training, Michael is pictured with his mom, Betty Rahilly, who passed away in 2022.



Michael, at 17 in this photo, and his late father were both volunteer firemen with the Wicoppee Fire Company.



Michael is pictured here with his sister on her wedding day in 1993, while he was on leave from his station in Germany.

THE GULF WAR

During basic training, Michael and his unit were told to prepare as if they were going to war. The day before graduation, they learned they were being sent to Fort Dix, N.J., in support of Operation Desert Shield, the initial phase focused on defending Saudi Arabia after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

In the Persian Gulf, Michael's Military Police unit provided security for an ammunition supply point near the U.S. Air Force base in Riyadh, the Saudi Arabian capital. Days before the ground war began, they were reassigned to West Camp, a POW facility near the Kuwait-Iraq border. Among the prisoners were two Americans, one of whom—Shant Kenderian—became a close friend.

Years earlier, as a teenager, Shant had been visiting his father in Iraq when war broke out with Iran. Like all Iraqi males of military age, he was prohibited from leaving the country and forced into military service. A decade later, just as he was preparing to return to the U.S. after the borders had reopened, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and Shant was again conscripted into the Iraqi Navy.

Captured by U.S. forces and held at West Camp, he met Michael. Eventually allowed to return home to the U.S., Shant reached out to Michael, and they reunited in East Fishkill, where Shant met Michael's parents and siblings.

Shant's memoir, *1001 Nights in Iraq*, includes photos and stories from his time there with Michael. "He reached out and asked if he could include me in the book," Michael says. "We still keep in touch."

For his service, Michael earned three Army Achievement Medals, the Southwest Asia Service Medal with three Bronze Stars, the National Defense Service Medal, Kuwait Liberation Medals from both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the Army Commendation Medal, and numerous other commendations. He was later awarded the Cold War Certificate and the New York State Medal for Merit with seven awards.

DUTCHESS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

After his discharge in 1995, Michael became an EMT and later a paramedic. In 2000, he joined the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office as a patrol officer. He earned a bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership and Communication from Marist College in 2009. Like his parents, he also became an EMT volunteer with the Wicoppee Fire Company as well as an EMT with the East Fishkill Rescue Squad for more than 20 years.

In 2013, Michael became a School Resource Officer (SRO) in the Pawling school district. Three years later, he was appointed accreditation manager for the Sheriff's Office, successfully completing two reaccreditations. In 2021, he was promoted to Sergeant and now oversees nine SROs serving 21 schools across Dutchess County.

"I love knowing that every day I make a difference in keeping our children and community safe," Michael says. "I work with a group of dedicated individuals—people I consider not just colleagues, but friends."

Reflecting on his military service days, he has no regrets about serving his country, adding that "it made me mature faster." Today, he enjoys being the Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 5913 in Wappingers Falls, "working alongside my fellow Veterans to serve the community."

As for his career in law enforcement, although the job has evolved over the 25 years since he began, he has learned to adapt, and "it is still a great calling to serve the community and keep people safe." He hopes to retire from the Sheriff's Office in two years but plans to continue working in some capacity, gaining time to enjoy outdoor activities, including working around his house in East Fishkill, where he and his wife Kristen raised their four children.

Although Patrick, Brenden, Addison, and Harper have all graduated from John Jay High School and are now either in college or working on their careers, the couple doesn't plan to move anytime soon. "No matter how big our town has grown," adds Michael, "we are still a small community at heart." ♦



Michael, Commander of VFW Post 5913 in Wappingers Falls, attended Spirit of '45 Day this past August with his wife Kristen and their children—Addison, Brenden, Patrick, and Harper.