

Family of fallen marine pays tribute throughout Memorial Day weekend

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ROBERT C. REED/RECORD: Eunice Eckard proudly holds a portrait of her son Gunnery Sgt. Chris Eckard, while sitting in her quiet room which is a memorial to her fallen hero. Gunnery Sgt. Eckard was killed in action on Feb. 20, 2010, by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan.

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HICKORY – Eunice Eckard and her family will not have a cookout on Memorial Day.

Six years after her son, Chris Eckard, was killed in an explosion in Afghanistan in February 2010, Eunice Eckard has difficulty celebrating Memorial Day in the way many Americans do.

"A family should celebrate Memorial Day. You know we just kind of find that still hard. It's still kind of new to us," Eunice Eckard said.

"We didn't know what Memorial Day was until Chris, until it comes home. And a lot of people don't until it's your family," Eunice Eckard said.

From a young age, Chris Eckard showed an interest in the military.

As a child, he would go around the house in a uniform.



"We could see him but he would said, 'did you see me?' and we'd say 'no, we didn't see you,'" Eunice Eckard said.

Chris Eckard joined the Army National Guard in 1998 and the Marines in 2001.

Gunnery Sgt. Chris Eckard was on his fifth deployment when he was killed in Afghanistan. His four previous deployments had been in Iraq.

He left behind a wife, Ashley Eckard and two sons, Steven and Avery, as well as his mother and brother, Chad Eckard, among other relatives.

Chris Eckard's death inspired the creation of the Fallen Heroes Ministry out of Sandy Ridge Baptist Church. The organization was formed by a group of men, including Chris Eckard's uncle, who wanted to honor Chris

Eckard and other fallen service members, as well as minister to the families.

The group's activities include going to craft shows and handing out cards free of charge as a way of providing support for families of those who have died in service.

The cards include the name of the deceased service member, the name of a family member and the family member's address. People are invited to write messages of support and thanks to send to the families, Eunice Eckard said.

Memorial Day weekend, Eunice Eckard and her family attended several events to honor fallen service members.

On Saturday morning, they participated in the grave flagging held by Sand Ridge American Legion Post 544 at Woodlawn Memorial Gardens, where Chris Eckard is buried. They also attended in the luminary service held by Post 544 on Sunday evening.

The Fallen Heroes Ministry went to display posters and hand out T-shirts to race winners at Hickory Motor Speedway on Saturday night.

Years after his death, the Eckard family finds personal ways to honor Chris Eckard's memory.

Eunice Eckard devotes a special room in her home as a memorial to Chris Eckard, with photos, decorations and a framed uniform. As new items from Chris Eckard are found, they are included in the room, Eunice Eckard said.



Chad Eckard thinks of the good Chris Eckard did with his work in Explosive Ordnance Disposal.

"The thing I take away from it is, the job he did, disarming IEDS, saved a lot of lives, both military and civilian," Chad Eckard said.

While honoring Chris Eckard is a major motivation for Eunice Eckard, she looks to honor all those who died in service.

"It's for him. It's not for us; it's for him, and all of

them. Not just him, it's for all the fallen," Eunice Eckard said.