I love the work and if I die, know that I'm doing precisely what I want to be
human rights activists and women's groups, independents who are motivated and capable of leading this country.
Hope they're strong enough by then. It's a terrible

The Better Angel

In life, Fern Holland touched those around her with an unending well of energy, optimism, hope, and hard work. In death, she lives on, thanks to a legacy borne of human rights endeavors and a rare and beautiful desire to enhance the lives of others. Our 2004 Oklahoman of the Year, *Oklahoma Today* celebrates the life of this formidable young woman. By Scott Wigton

IT WAS THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER 2003, AND Fern Holland was lounging poolside in Oklahoma City while visiting her good friend LeAnn Harmon. Fern's older sisters, Vi and Mary Ann, were there, as were Fern's young nephews, Logan and Stephen, splashing nearby in the water.

It was hot—that dense, stifling kind of Oklahoma heat, with the temperature hovering near 100 degrees. But that thermometer reading was nothing compared to the inferno of south-central Iraq into which Fern would be headed in a matter of days. In that arid place, where summer temperatures can reach more than 120 degrees, it takes an almost preternatural willpower to function—exactly the kind of willpower Fern seemed to possess.

Fern had told Harmon about her upcoming mission in Iraq, where first as a representative of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and later with the Coalition Provisional Authority, she would lead efforts to build women's centers and promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

"Iraq was very personal for her, and for the first time, I didn't caution her," says Harmon. Ever since their days at the University of Oklahoma, Harmon had grown accustomed to warning Fern about the hazards not only her humanitarian efforts but her choices of recreation.

Fern, after all, was a woman who skied with abandon down expert slopes, trekked alone in the Himalayas of Nepal, swam with great white sharks in South Africa, and leapt from airplanes at 10,000 feet. She also was a capable and fiercely competitive athlete, from her days of high school softball in Miami to pitching for her Tulsa law firm's team.

At age thirty-three, Bluejacket native Fern Holland was killed in March 2004 while working for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. A former Tulsa lawyer and Peace Corps volunteer, Fern opened eighteen women's centers to help educate Iraqi women about democracy, business, and technology.

She already had paid a steep physical price: ligament ruptures in her knees and multiple surgeries. But such undertakings and their latent risks weren't about to stop Fern. Among her Delta Gamma sorority sisters at OU, she was dubbed "Fearless Fern," the natural blond beauty who made excellent grades, possessed uncanny drive, and seemed ordained to high accomplishment.

"We expected her to be an ambassador someday," Harmon says.

Fern's talent and boldness ultimately resolved itself into a determination to spread justice and human rights in some of the world's most oppressive places. Turning away from a conventional, safe, and lucrative legal career, Fern embraced the challenges and accepted the deprivations and dangers that came with human rights work. Her new path would take her to Africa with the Peace Corps, where she lived among native tribes in Namibia. Later, she helped establish legal aid clinics for abused women in refugee camps in the West African country of Guinea.

Now there was a new call emanating from an ancient land that had witnessed a ceaseless tide of conquest, from the Babylonians and Assyrians to the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Turks, and British. The Americans had come to Mesopotamia, a place that had never known anything like democracy or women's rights; a place where drab sands and date groves concealed the desiccated remains of hundreds of

ILLUSTRATION: STEVEN WALKER; FERN: STEVEN E. MOORE

thousands—possibly a million—of Saddam Hussein's victims, along with the detritus of four-plus millennia of human civilization.

"I could see she was very much called to go there," Harmon says. "She was happy about it and knew she would be able to help. It was like she found herself."

There, beside the pool on that hot summer's day, it suddenly occurred to Harmon that this would be the last time she would ever see Fern. As they soaked up the late July sun, Harmon tenderly studied her friend's delicate features, her striking blue eyes, the thin patrician lips, and of course, her blond hair.

"She asked me why I was looking at her funny, and I told her, 'I'm just remembering your face,'" Harmon says.

"Fern Just Came Different."

NOVELIST THOMAS WOLFE WROTE THAT you can't go home again, but it also may be argued that wherever you go, your home goes with you. Everything that helped shape us—from our parents and siblings, neighbors and community, religion and education to the very land itself—leaves an indelible imprint on us all. And so it was with Fern Leona Holland, born August 5, 1970, the youngest of five children from a troubled family with its roots in the tiny northeastern Oklahoma farming town of Bluejacket, population 274.

For a time, the family lived on a 240-acre farm. Fern's father, Joe Holland, taught college accounting courses in Miami and tended the farm on the side.

"She was a beautiful baby," says Fern's brother Joe Ben, who was eight years old when Fern arrived.

The beautiful blond child came along toward the end of her parent's stormy relationship. Joe Holland's infidelities helped to push Fern's mother, Mary Holland, over the edge emotionally.

"Mother didn't do real well," Joe Ben says. "And Fern played a huge role—even as a baby—supporting our mother. Our parents divorced when Fern was little bitty, and Mother was really needy emotionally. Somehow Fern sensed this, and she was constantly there. Fern's childhood was spent taking care of our mother."

With unshakable devotion, Fern became her mother's ever-present comforter. Joe Ben recalls the day his mother swallowed pills in a suicide attempt and his father was trying to call an ambulance.

"I bet Fern was two or three," he says. "And Mother was threatening to run out through the sliding glass doors and get lost in the woods and die. Fern ran in and wrapped herself around Mother's leg. If I remember correctly, Mother couldn't get Fern off her leg. Who knows? Maybe she saved Mom's life that day."

The divorce was traumatic. For a time, Mary Holland was committed to a mental health facility, and two great-aunts helped care for the children. Joe Ben and his younger brother James eventually moved to the farm to live with their father (who died in 1993), while Fern and her older sister Vi lived with their mother in Miami. Eldest sister Mary Ann already had a place of her own. Mary Holland steadily pieced her life back together, working as a secretary and then going to graduate school until she became a counselor for the mentally ill.

"Miami really was home to us," says Vi, who now lives with her young son, Stephen, in Oklahoma City. Two years older than Fern, the sisters were exceptionally close. "It was always the two of us, Fern and Vi. We were like twins."

Of the pair, Vi was the extrovert, Fern the introvert. Vi was the cheerleader, while Fern became the standout student-athlete at Miami High School. Fern may have felt their mother's rebuilt life depended on her successes, which included being homecoming queen and salutatorian of her graduating class. In the process, Fern held down jobs at Tastee Freeze and Radio Shack.

"She made straight As and excelled at everything," Vi says. "She had this enormous energy and drive. What I think drove her was a desire to please Mother and to keep her happy."

"She made straight As and excelled at everything," Vi says. "She had this enormous energy and drive. What I think drove her was a desire to please Mother and to keep her happy."

Fern also developed interests in photography, poetry, and art, and during her senior year, she painted an odd—if evocative—picture of a rose inset with a crying eye. The painting must have held some significance for her, because she hauled it with her through college and afterwards. Joe Ben has it today.

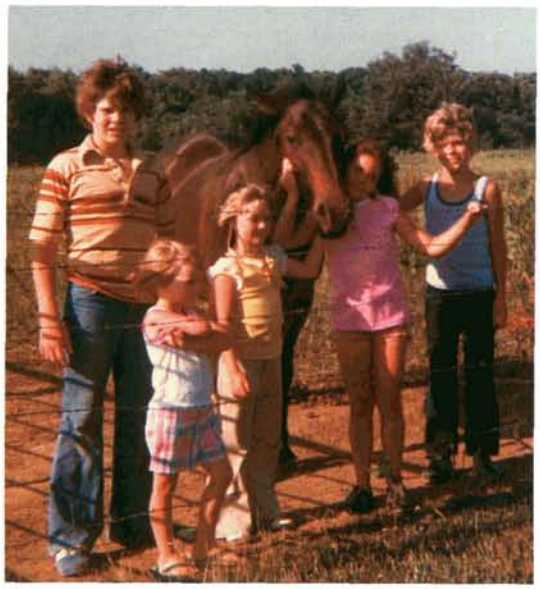
Indeed, though Fern was small in physical stature, standing five feet two inches and weighing no more than 115 pounds, there seemed no goal in life so big it could not be overcome by her boundless energy and optimism.

"She was always tireless," Vi says. "She lived her life in fast-forward, almost like she sensed there wasn't enough time."

Fern did not yet know exactly where she was going, but wherever it was, she was in a hurry to get there.

"It seemed to me that Fern just came different," Joe Ben says. "None of the rest of us was like Fern. She was in her own league."

After her death, Holland received numerous awards, including the Secretary of Defense Medal for the Defense of Freedom and the Heroic Oklahoman award. Several honors have been named for her, including the Oklahoma Bar Association's Fern Holland Courageous Lawyer Award, the Fern Holland Award from Vital Voices (founders include Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright), and the Fern L. Holland Memorial Scholarship at OU.



"It Was Hard to Keep up with Her."

HARMON AND FERN SEEMED NATURAL FRIENDS AT OU. Both came from small towns, both were class standouts, and both pledged the Delta Gamma sorority. The pair roomed together regularly in the sorority house and off-campus during summer breaks.

"We got along immediately," says Harmon, a publishing consultant who represents an author of educational books. "She was very philosophical and liked to debate. She was always on the side of the underdog. The thing I remember most is that she was always interested in children and was going to help them."

A psychology major, Fern was popular and unpretentious. She also was occasionally prone to humorous lapses in judgment, instances her friends would call "pulling a Fern." Once such incident, Harmon says, occurred on a sorority trip to Cancun, Mexico. Fern drove a rental car and left it parked too far down on the beach. The vehicle washed into the sea when the tide came in.

Still, says Harmon, "She had such a sense of grace and was very warm and open and easy to talk to. She didn't have any real sense of vanity. She would go to class with wet hair, cutoff shorts, and flip-flops and not give it a second thought."

Fern did give second thoughts to the career choices before her. Torn between medical school and the law, she took a year off to travel after graduation. During that time, she helped with an archaeological dig in Israel, traveled through Europe, and worked with children in a Russian orphanage. While abroad, she finally made up her mind about a career. It would be the law.

"She really felt that would be the way she could effect the most change for the good," says Vi.

With the same immense energy and alacrity she brought to all her efforts, Fern graduated with honors from the University of Tulsa College of Law in 1996 and accepted an offer as an associate at Barkley & Rodolf, the Tulsa medical malpractice defense firm where she had been clerking through law school.

"She showed a lot of promise and imagination and had a great work ethic," says Stephen Rodolf, Fern's former boss, close friend, and professional sounding board. "It was impossible to outwork her. But it was her ability to think creatively that set her apart."

Fern seemed to require less sleep than most and was relentless when it came to work. There were no long, lazy stints in front of the television, save for an occasional episode of *Seinfeld*. Vacations tended to be equally intense, according to Leslie Meyers, Fern's roommate in Tulsa during her years in law school and afterwards.

"She lived each day to the fullest, whether it was work or play," says Meyers, now a pharmaceutical representative in Dallas. "She was spontaneous. She'd say, 'Let's go skiing,' and the next thing I knew, she was on the phone making reservations. It was hard to keep up with her. She had a spirit about her that could go all the time. I can't think of anyone else like that."

Holland and her siblings, Mary Ann, Joe Ben, James, and Vi, grew up in Bluejacket and Miami. As an adult, Holland left Oklahoma to travel and work globally, which included a stint in Namibia with the Peace Corps, bottom left, and at a Russian orphanage, above right.

Often underestimated by opponents, Fern was able to come up with novel approaches that sent more experienced attorneys reeling, Rodolf says.

"They would see this cute little blond and think, 'This is going to be easy,' but when she was convinced she was right, she wasn't going to be intimidated by anyone, and this is a profession that thrives on intimidation."

But as good as she was, Fern's heart was never truly in corporate law. In his downtown Tulsa office, Rodolf keeps a few books Fern gave to him. There's one by Whitman, another by Thoreau, one by Ayn Rand, and yet another by Sartre. Rodolf says Fern was intrigued by existentialism—a philosophy that at its core argues that each individual must define the essence of his or her existence.

"It didn't surprise me at all that she was going to move on," Rodolf says. "I realized we wouldn't be holding her for long. I always thought what we did might be a little too corporate for her."

She stayed with Barkley & Rodolf nearly three years as a practicing lawyer and then briefly joined another Tulsa law firm, Connor & Winters, for about a year. Something was pushing her on, a nagging sense that she needed to be doing something else.

She had been, perhaps, biding her time, staying close to family. In 1998, Fern's mother, Mary, passed away after years of failing health. Fern was still young, single, and eager to make a difference. Then in 2000, she was accepted for a two-year commitment in the Peace Corps to help the undereducated, abused, and impoverished of the Third World.

"I remember taking her to the airport," Rodolf says. "She was going to Namibia to do great things. She was the last person to get on the plane, and as she was going down the tunnel, she turned to me and waved. I remember thinking she looked like a little girl going off to camp. She had her backpack, and she looked so small, almost in conflict with what she was setting out to do."

The Road to Iraq

THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACKS OCCURED SEVERAL MONTHS before Fern completed her full term with the Peace Corps. The attacks compelled her to leave Africa and be closer to friends and family, and within a week she was back in Tulsa, staying with Meyers. Almost immediately, the two women decided to go to New York, to be as close to Ground Zero as they were allowed.

"The ruins were still smoldering, and there was this terrible, acrid smell in the air," says Meyers. "A lot people were wearing masks, but not Fern. We saw the pictures of the missing that people had put up, and she didn't turn away from any of it. She wanted to experience it head-on."

By December 2001, Fern was in Washington DC, pursuing a degree in international law at Georgetown Law Center and working full time for a labor law firm. Nevertheless, she would soon plunge back into the world of human rights, returning to the African nation of Guinea, where, as an agent of the American Refugee Committee, she documented the sexual exploitation of women in refugee camps. Her subsequent report on the abuses led to an invitation to set up a legal aid clinic in the camp.

'It was impossible to outwork her. But it was her ability to think creatively that set her apart.'

"It was really groundbreaking work she ended up doing. People thought it couldn't be done because this is Africa, this is a refugee camp," said Colleen Striegel of the American Refugee Committee in *The Oklahoman*. Striegel had accompanied Holland to Guinea.

Fern's goal was to continue her work to establish women's legal aid clinics throughout West Africa, but soon a more pressing opportunity arose, one set in motion by the events of September 11, 2001, and decided upon in the corridors of power in Washington. In March and April 2003, American-led coalition military forces swiftly unseated Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Now they were going to try and bring democracy and human rights to a land that had never known it.

Help was needed.

"If I Don't Do It, Nobody Will."

CHRIS O'DONNELL HAD ALREADY BEEN IN-COUNTRY A few weeks as he awaited the arrival of fellow USAID worker Fern Holland in Iraq.

"She came in on a convoy with a bunch of marines from Al-Kut—a four-hour drive in the hot sun. It had been a difficult trip for her: lost luggage, missed airplane flights, and then, to top it off, the convoy ride," O'Donnell says.

Based in Al-Hillah in the south-central, Shiite-dominated region of Iraq, the pair worked closely together with other American and Iraqi colleagues through the summer and fall of 2003, attending countless meetings, organizing local men and women, setting up women's centers, and laying the groundwork for future democratic processes and institutions.

Days were long, usually from 7 a.m. to 1 a.m. or later, seven days a week. Fern and her colleagues traveled from town to town at the wheel of armored Chevrolet Suburbans.

"Temperatures would soar past 120 during the day, and we were lucky if we had a fan in the room," O'Donnell says.

Work proceeded at a breakneck pace, and Fern was always willing to do more.

"There was this tremendous sense of urgency about her. She was always trying to do everything at once, and she had no problem taking on more work, even if it was really outside the scope of our mission. If local children needed medical attention, she would help. She would tell me, 'If I don't do it, nobody else will,'" O'Donnell says.

An air force veteran, O'Donnell was repeatedly astounded by Fern's tirelessness.

"I always got tired," he says. "I could never keep up with her. I would jokingly say, 'Can I have a time-out, please?'"

Hilary White, who also worked in Iraq with Fern, says her former colleague was driven by the desire to give women and the people of Iraq a chance for self-determination.

"She spent all her waking time thinking of ways to enable the Iraqi women, to bring democracy training to Iraqi men and women, and to help the women's centers become income generating."

Along with her Iraqi deputy, program manager Salwa Oumashi, Fern's efforts led to the creation of eighteen women's centers throughout south-central Iraq—places where women could learn about rights, get involved in democratic processes, create microbusinesses, and become acquainted with technology.

With her striking appearance (her Iraqi colleagues often teasingly referred to her as "Barbie") and prodigious work ethic, Fern was well known and popular with the Iraqis she had come to help, says Zainab Al-Suwaij, an Iraqi-American who is executive director of the American Islamic Congress.

"The majority of women there were very happy about her being with them," says Al-Suwaij. "They loved her."

No obstacle seemed too big to her, according to Manal Omar, an American Arab who now heads the Iraqi division of Women for Women International.

"My strongest memory is the first time we went to see the building that later would be the first women's center in the south, which was based in Hillah. The building was devastated, and I could not help but feel that we might have bit off more than we could chew," says Omar. "Fern stood in the middle of the building with a smile. She had a vision of what the women's center would look like and was not discouraged in the least. She could see it fully functional, and indeed, within months, the building was renovated and had gained nationwide attention."

Flush with cash disbursed by the Coalition Provisional Authority, which had taken over development of women's centers in Iraq, Fern and Salwa Oumashi set up first-rate facilities equipped with computers and Internet connections. Local women joined in large numbers and took the initiative of holding their own meetings. White, who now works in the Office of Public Liaison at the White House, says Fern loved the Iraqi people. "They found her confidence intriguing, and they would smile as she talked with them. She always made them laugh and feel at ease."

'They were against western women bringing new values and ideas to our women.'

Violent Murmurings

AS MUCH AS MOST IRAQIS LIKED FERN AND THE OTHER women's rights workers, it became apparent they had enemies, too, especially among some extremists who felt threatened by the idea of "their women" obtaining new rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. Additionally, Iraq's conservative religious parties already had organized politically and didn't want any new competition, O'Donnell says. "As Fern became more successful, other parties would become more desperate."

A major women's meeting in October 2003, the Heartland of Iraq Women's Conference in Hillah, was a huge success, but even as the conference proceeded inside, hostility brewed outside. Angry men scrawled anti-Western slogans and grumbled bitterly about Fern Holland.

"They were against western women bringing new values and ideas to our women, and they were afraid the women wouldn't listen to the men anymore," Al-Suwaij says.

Alarmed, Al-Suwaij warned Fern about the mounting hostility, but Fern, she says, "seemed okay. Not afraid."

Friends and family say Fern was aware of the enmity but didn't want to isolate herself from the Iraqi people by living in fortified compounds or traveling with weapons and bodyguards, something Al-Suwaij doesn't think about twice.

"I don't drive there," she says. "It's too dangerous for a woman, and I have the same features and speak the language."

When it came to advocating for women's rights, however, Fern would not be deterred. According to the *New York Times Magazine*, Fern had helped resolve a dispute between two women and a former Baath party member squatting illegally on their land. On March 9, 2004, the man's house was bulldozed.

In the afternoon of that same day, as Fern was driving back to Hillah after visiting the Karbala women's center, her vehicle was overtaken by a police truck on an empty stretch of road. Several men sprayed her Daewoo with AK-47 automatic rifle fire.

The barrage killed Fern, fellow Coalition Provisional Authority employee Bob Zangas, and Oumashi. Although men in a police truck were later captured, their weapons still hot, authorities determined they did not commit the crime. (As of press time, the case remains under international investigation.)

Many see Fern's killing as nothing less than a politically motivated assassination.

Amira, a trainer at Women for Women International, worked with Holland. As is customary in Iraqi culture, friends gathered at Amira's home on the fortieth day following Holland's death to conclude their official mourning and share a meal.

انهيار القادر على كل
البيضاء التجارية

Holland connected with many people around the world. Her work will continue through the Fern L. Holland Charitable Foundation, the Fern L. Holland Democracy Institute in Africa, and the Fern Holland Legal Aid Clinic of Nzérekoré, Guinea. Holland is buried at the Bluejacket Cemetery, opposite.

"She was the most engaged and committed person in the Shiite south, and with every success and every center that opened, her risk went up," O'Donnell says. "She could have been seen as a threat by any number of groups: those against women's rights, religious fundamentalists, former Baath officials."

Al-Suwaij speculates along similar lines. "In my opinion, they were upset about women's rights and freedoms coming to Iraq. They felt threatened by her and her activities. I think that had a lot to do with it."

A Future Unlived

NEARLY TEN MONTHS AFTER HER SISTER'S KILLING, VI Holland still could not bring herself to unpack many of the boxes containing Fern's belongings. They remained unopened inside the new house the sisters were to have shared with Vi's son, Stephen, upon Fern's final return from Iraq in June 2004.

Some of the other artifacts of Fern's life were earlier distributed among siblings. Joe Ben claimed Fern's mystifying painting of the rose with the crying eye, something he felt peculiarly drawn to.

"It looks like the whole rose is traveling down a road that doesn't end, flowing down the road of eternity," Joe Ben says. "It makes me think of the sadness she felt or maybe that God has for man's inhumanity to man."

Vi's house in many respects is a shrine to her younger sister. Blowups of photographs Fern took on her travels adorn the walls. One of her poems sits framed atop a shelf. A Fender guitar leans against the wall, still inside its nylon case.

"That was Fern's. She liked to play, but she wasn't very good," Vi says.

In the midst of all the dazzling professional accomplishments, family and friends reveal the Fern they knew: the one who loved jazz music but couldn't sing, who preferred nonfiction books, who rarely watched television but enjoyed any movie with Brad Pitt simply because it starred Brad Pitt, and who had planned to work for George Bush's reelection. There was the Fern who profoundly loved children and was a fun-loving aunt to her nephews and nieces.

She was also the one who would always listen to friends in crisis but who resisted ever talking about herself or her problems.

"She just didn't talk about herself," Harmon says. "You really had to dig."

What would the future have held for Fern Holland? A coffee lover, she had spoken of opening a café in Oklahoma City, ideally a place where like-minded individuals would gather to talk about ideas and issues. While in Washington DC, she had worked at a Starbucks to learn the ropes of the business. And, yes, she also dreamed of a family of her own.

"She wanted to marry and have children," Vi says. "She just hadn't found the right man yet."

The Power of One

TO VIRTUALLY EVERYONE—FAMILY, FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES, and distant admirers alike—Fern was a real-life heroine. In an age of cynical posturing, when style and attitude too often are taken for substance, Fern Holland was one of those rare individuals who revealed her character not through empty rhetoric and good intentions but through authentic deeds. One of her admirers is Cherokee principal chief Chad Smith, who brought his children to Fern's memorial service in Tulsa to honor a fellow citizen of the Cherokee Nation.

"Very rarely do we get to see real heroes anymore," Smith says. "The media markets to us sports figures and rock stars, but they're commercial images, imitations of true heroes. If you've got somebody

of the highest integrity and respect for humankind who makes the ultimate sacrifice of life, that's a true hero."

The Cherokee Nation issued a resolution declaring that Fern had died a "warrior" and acknowledged her "courageous commitment to human rights, and for having sacrificed her life in the service of others."

Vi has since taken up some of her sister's unfinished business as best she can, determined to help keep the women's centers in Iraq functioning during the tumultuous transition from tyranny to democracy. Former colleague O'Donnell believes Fern's work in Iraq will make a lasting impact if it can be preserved.

"We are the caretakers of her legacy, and we do that by continuing her work," he says. "We have to ensure that [the human rights and democratic leaders in Iraq] have the intellectual and financial capacity to be sustainable."

According to several sources in Iraq, Fern is remembered with tender admiration and profound respect.

"If there is someone I would bring back from death at the price of my own life, it would be no one but Fern," says University of Babylon lecturer Raad Abd-Aun, who worked with Fern in Iraq.

Many see simple, inspirational lessons in Fern's life.

"She made me believe that one person could make a difference," Omar says. "When I have the urge to turn away from Iraq and run to safety, I remember my dear friends, Fern and Salwa."

Last October, Leslie Meyers gave birth to a son she named Holland in honor of Fern. Fern, she says, lived by a simple, unspoken principle: "Live life to the fullest and help as many people along the way as you can."

A Final Trip Home

A BLACK STRIP OF NEW ASPHALT, STATE HIGHWAY 25 cuts through the heart of Bluejacket, a dispersed collection of small, wood-sided homes and trailers. At Garrett's General Store, local farmers gather in their blue jean overalls to eat lunch and sip coffee. They're polite, curious, weathered-looking, and happy to offer directions.

"It was tragic what happened," says a clerk, pausing from sweeping the floor. "But it must be some comfort for her family that she died doing what she believed was the right thing."

Just across the Little Cabin Creek and up a dirt road shaded by tall trees is the Bluejacket Cemetery, founded in 1902 and named after the town's founder, Reverend Charles Bluejacket, whose descendant, Morris Dale "Blue" Bluejacket, is today the town mayor.

The cemetery is a small, serene place bounded by rolling pasture and swept gently by the wind on an early autumn day. In the distance, cows graze, and the stillness is broken only by the occasional screech of a hawk and the undulating thrum of crickets. It doesn't take long to walk the grounds, and one soon realizes there are far too many children and infants here, mothers lost in childbirth and men laid to rest in their prime years.

There is a motley collection of headstones, with a few so timeworn the names are illegible. Others are no more than slabs of concrete with names crudely chiseled on them. One marker is merely a piece of faded, rotting wood, with an unevenly written name testifying to a mother's loving hand.

DAVID MCDANIEL/THE OKLAHOMAN

'If there is someone I would bring back from death at the price of my own life, it would be no one but Fern.'

All of it bears witness to a hard, rugged, and unpredictable existence with no guarantees. At the back of the cemetery, Fern's remains lay next to her mother's. On her mother's granite headstone is a rose and this inscription:

MOTHER
Come, sit and talk with me. I'll listen.

There is a striking incongruity between the tranquil, yet confident fertility of this place and the parched, violent districts of Iraq, where Fern worked so hard to plant the seeds of self-determination and freedom and gave the last full measure of devotion to her cause. Is she the last of her kind?

"To tell you the truth, if America cannot give birth to another Fern, then it is a sterile nation," says Abd-Aun. "Fern is everything [America] ever wanted to be."

Perhaps Fern simply came "the way she was," or maybe, in true Sartrean style, her life was a conscious project of choice layered upon choice and playing itself out to an inevitably tragic, though heroic, conclusion. Maybe her life was the product of a creative tension between the forces of self-determination and fate.

Fern always seemed to be in a hurry to do something. For years, she didn't quite know what it was. She only knew she needed to prepare for it, goaded on by the ever-present gadfly of conscience. Perhaps at last she found it in Iraq, her life's mission and the thing that fully engaged all her talents, her passion, her very being.

As she wrote in one of her final emails: "I love the work, and if I die, know that I'm doing precisely what I want to be doing—working to organize and educate human rights activists and women's groups…"

If we dare, we can only measure ourselves against such courage and compassion and wonder if we too might answer the call, in our own ways, to what Abraham Lincoln termed "the better angels of our nature."

The improbable arc of life that took a small-town Oklahoma girl halfway around the world to help others in need has turned back on itself and ended where it began thirty-three years earlier, in Bluejacket, Oklahoma. Fern is home again.