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THIS YEAR 28 Fatalities **7** Killed in U.S. **178** Fatalities **24** Killed since 1989 in U.S. in Texas



HERESA NAJERA : VALLEY MORNING STAR FILE

TEXAS CRASH: Local and Coast Guard officials inspect the site of a medical helicopter crash that killed three people in February off the coast of South Padre Island.

CITY & STATE

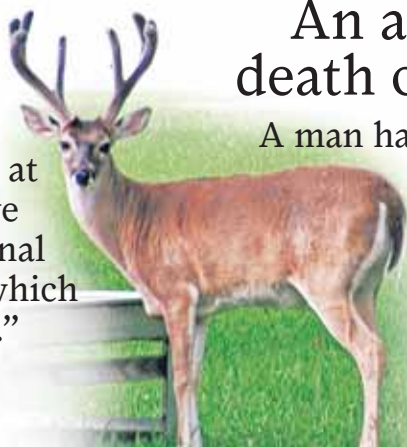
A witness to Pearl Harbor



Sixty-seven years ago, a U.S. Army librarian sat down at a typewriter to give her family a personal look at the “date which will live in infamy.”

STORY ON PAGE B2

An arrest in the death of Mr. Buck



A man has been charged in the decapitation of Mr. Buck, the beloved deer at Bear Creek Pioneers Park.

STORY ON PAGE B1

ACTING OUT A REALITY

At Fort Polk, Iraqi refugees join the U.S. military to teach troops about the culture and chaos they’re likely to encounter overseas

War set on a Louisiana stage

Note: One in an occasional series on how Iraqi refugees are settling into the Houston area.

By LINDSAY WISE
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

FORT POLK, LA. — If the armored combat vehicles rolling by are the first clue that there’s something unusual about this pine forest in rural Louisiana, the street signs in Arabic are the second.

On 200,000 acres about four hours from Houston, the Army has replicated 22 Iraqi villages — complete with markets, mosques and even goats — to train soldiers how to cope with everything from a suicide bombing to tea with a local sheik.

As the military strategy in Iraq has shifted from open warfare to counter-insurgency, American soldiers increasingly are trying to build relationships with Iraqis to help reduce violence. Their lives and the lives of the civilians they encounter could depend on their ability to communicate across cultural



MAYRA BELTRÁN : CHRONICLE

ROLE-PLAYING: During an exercise at Fort Polk, La., Dhyaa Yousif, center, demands help from the military after a mock blast. Yousif is one of many Iraqi refugees assisting the Army. Find more photos at chron.com.

and language barriers.

So, to prepare soldiers for Iraq, the Army needs Iraqis. More than 300 of them — including about 50 from the Houston area — travel to Fort Polk’s Joint Readiness Training Center every few months to populate the fake villages. They don traditional robes, speak only Arabic and wear elaborate makeup to simulate

Please see **ACTORS**, Page A26

‘SECOND-GUESSING’
Blackwater guards’ attorneys say they’ll fight charges. **PAGE A21**

Government’s failure to tighten flying rules, require sensor gear cited in medical copter crashes

By ROMA KHANNA
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Through a cloud-choked and starless night in February, the crew of an emergency medical helicopter flew east on a 30-mile journey from Harlingen to South Padre Island, where a sick patient waited to be airlifted to a mainland hospital.

As the crew neared its destination, weather conditions forced a steep turn. The pilot, according to records, circled briefly in strong winds and at 8:54 p.m., the helicopter and its crew crashed into the shallow waters of the Laguna Madre bay.

All aboard died — the pilot and both paramedics — three people among 28 killed in medical helicopter tragedies in 2008, the deadliest year ever for such crashes.

According to a Chronicle review of fatal crashes, most of those 28 died in conditions known to be dangerous, condi-

tions that repeatedly have been the subject of unfulfilled government promises for more stringent standards.

Two of the crashes, in which seven people died, took place in Texas.

Both happened at night. Both pilots faced reduced visibility.

And safety officials have cited both Texas crashes, along with others in recent months, as they question how many lives would have been saved if regulators had moved faster to require stricter flight rules and advanced sensor equipment to forewarn pilots of potential hazards.

Please see **COPTERS**, Page A4

chron.com

ONLINE: See a map, database and reports on each of the 65 fatal crashes reviewed by as many as 4 million residents and visitors drawn to a week of pomp and pageantry.

Finally, Green told them, they’ll reach open-air, standing room-only sites where they’ll spend hours awaiting the inauguration, which will take place on the steps of the Capitol. And, yes, the weather on Jan. 20 is likely to be cold.

An unrelenting demand to witness historic oath

Requests for inaugural tickets flood lawmakers

By STEWART M. POWELL
WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — They started calling Pete Olson hours after the Sugar Land Republican was elected to Congress last month. They wanted

tickets — anywhere, period — for Barack Obama’s inauguration.

Rep. Gene Green, D-Houston, warned the thrilled ticket seekers that they’ll face marathon hikes across a city paralyzed by as many as 4 million residents and visitors drawn to a week of pomp and pageantry.

Finally, Green told them, they’ll reach open-air, standing room-only sites where they’ll spend hours awaiting the inauguration, which will take place on the steps of the Capitol. And, yes, the weather on Jan. 20 is likely to be cold.

Still, everybody, it seemed, wanted tickets. So many that Texas’ two senators and 32 House members were inundated as never before by requests for passes for both seats

Please see **TICKETS**, Page A4

CHOICE FOR VA

Obama expected to name Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, once Rumsfeld’s adversary, as Veterans Affairs secretary. **PAGE A12**

SPORTS

It looks like OU, Florida

Oklahoma whips Missouri in the Big 12 championship game, while Florida upends No. 1 Alabama in the SEC title game.

STORIES ON PAGES C1, C5



KANSAS CITY STAR/MCT

ON TOP: OU’s Juquan Iglesias (9) and Chuck Brown celebrate the Sooners’ first TD.

Athletes, guns dangerous mix

Sensing that they are potential targets of violence, many pro athletes are carrying guns — which can lead to other troubles.

STORY ON PAGE C1



**Right Store.
Right Price.**



Russet Potatoes
5 lb bag Petites

99¢
each

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