

E-mails to families form shrines to fallen U.S. soldiers: Military families cope with loss

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It happens every time a U.S. soldier or marine dies in Iraq. Internet connections are shut down. Commanders don't want word of the death to reach the soldier's family before military officials can personally deliver the news.

Once the knock at the family door comes between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., the electronic blockade back in Iraq is lifted and a torrent of e-mails flows from the battlefield to the dead soldier's family in America.

The practice of military commanders sending personal letters to the families of fallen troops dates at least to the Civil War. But in an era when deployed soldiers can maintain MySpace pages, families have immediate access to a digital community of people offering condolences, stories and even glimpses into a loved one's final hours.

This is exactly what happened after Sergeant First Class Benjamin Sebban, a senior combat medic in the 82nd Airborne Division who grew up in South Amboy, New Jersey, was killed by an explosion while tending to wounded paratroopers in Iraq.

Sebban, 29, died March 17 in Baquba. By 6 p.m. in New Jersey, the phone rang in the casualty assistance office at Fort Monmouth.

Three hours later, a chaplain and two officers arrived at Sebban's mother's home in Neshanic Station. Then, almost immediately after the visit, came a tide of personal e-mails, offering condolences and testimonials to Sebban's life.

Among the first was one from Sergeant John Gilbert, a fellow medic. "He risked his life to make sure others were not harmed," Gilbert wrote. "That's the type of person he was."

The missives sent from the field to Sebban's family paint a portrait of a young man who could be funny, generous and uncompromising in performing his duties—all at the same time. The e-mails describe a practical joker, a confidant who lent \$600 to a fellow soldier who really needed it, and someone who was at work saving lives the day he died.

Messages from the combat zone become a central part of the shrines that many families eventually erect in their homes, said Joanne Steen, a grief counselor and author who advises the Pentagon on how to help military families cope with loss.

"People have a tendency of collecting and saving those things that belong to the deceased; they're sacred relics," said Steen, who lost her husband, a naval aviator, in a training accident. "You can never get enough information about your loved one. Each time they hear a story or get an e-mail, that's another piece of the puzzle they didn't have."

Besides his mother, Barbara Walsh, a nurse who was working as a missionary in Africa when he was born, Sebban is survived by two younger brothers, Daniel, 28, and David, 27. Both are army veterans.

Daniel Sebban said the family decided to share the e-mails about his brother soon after they began arriving from Iraq and then from other military outposts around the globe. Messages also arrived from sources as varied as the owner of a pizza parlor in South Amboy, former classmates at a Bible college in New York, and a navy physician who urged Benjamin Sebban to consider a career in medicine.

Walsh had protested the Vietnam War and never imagined any of her sons would join the military. "They could be pastors, they could be missionaries," she remembered thinking when they were young. But she learned to accept their decisions, especially Benjamin's.

The last time Walsh heard from Sebban, he had good news. He had been promoted from staff sergeant to sergeant first class. He talked of making a career of the army. "Two days later," she said, "he was dead."

In one of many e-mails from Iraq, Staff Sergeant Brian Merry wrote that Sebban had talked often about a visit he made to Arlington National Cemetery before shipping out. He had insisted that Merry do the same.

“Talked me into visiting before I deployed here,” Merry wrote. “Told me it made him feel humble to be there and it was just a spiritual place.”

Sergeant First Class Benjamin L. Sebban was buried at Arlington. Meanwhile, the e-mails from Iraq keep coming. -*Wayne Woolley, Religion News Service*