



Missing soldier dies in hotel ductwork

Body found in air conditioning unit ID'd as Iraq war vet missing for 12 days

The Associated Press

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SAVANNAH, Ga. - A Fort Benning soldier missing 12 days before his body was discovered in a downtown hotel died after he got caught in an industrial-sized air conditioner, officials said Saturday.

A maintenance worker at the DeSoto Hilton hotel found the man's body Friday in an area accessible through a maintenance door after guests complained of a foul odor in the lobby.

He died after being struck by a large, spinning blower wheel, said Lt. Mike Wilkins, a spokesman for Savannah-Chatham County police.

"At this point, it appears to be an accident," he said.

'At least we have closure'

An autopsy Saturday confirmed the identity of Spc. Robert Hornbeck, 23, of Lapeer, Mich., who was last seen outside the hotel April 16 after a late night of bar-hopping with an Army buddy. He answered his cell phone briefly after his father arrived just after 3 a.m. to give him a ride. He said, "Dad, I'm on the stairs," then the connection went dead.

Family members spent nearly two weeks combing Savannah's historic district for him. They posted fliers with Hornbeck's photo in store windows, took out a full-page ad in the local paper and offered a \$10,000 reward.

"At least we have closure and we can get him home and do the proper things to honor him," said Kirk Hornbeck, the soldier's uncle in Savannah.

Police had not determined how Hornbeck got into the hotel maintenance area or what he was doing there. He was not a guest at the hotel. Blood toxicology tests were also being performed. Hornbeck's father had previously said he suspects his son was intoxicated.

"I think maybe he'd in fact had too much to drink," Kirk Hornbeck said. "He might've thought he was going out the right door to the outside and got turned around inside the building and ended up in the wrong spot."

Recently back from Iraq

The soldier had traveled to Savannah to spend Easter weekend with his father and stepmother. He had returned to Fort Benning in January from a yearlong tour in Iraq with the 3rd Infantry Division.

Hornbeck planned to leave the Army at the end of April and return to the University of Michigan, where he studied psychology before joining the Army in 2004. He was scheduled to marry his college sweetheart in July.

Hornbeck's father was traveling back to Michigan on Saturday, where the family planned to bury Hornbeck with military honors, his uncle said.

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