



Wartime deaths leave Lubbock father heartbroken

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By CLAIRE CUMMINGS / The Dallas Morning News

LUBBOCK – On the front of the Velez home, a thin, freshly painted strip of green trim stands out – it's the wrong shade.

It's a reminder of the precise moment when Roy Velez learned that he had lost a second – and his last – son to war. Spc. Andrew Velez died July 25 from a self-inflicted gunshot wound while serving in Afghanistan. Less than two years ago, his older brother, Army Cpl. Jose "Freddie" Velez, was killed in Iraq in a battle for Fallujah.

Mr. Velez and his wife, Carmen, had just returned from exchanging the house paint for the right color. She was in the back yard washing brushes when she heard her husband scream.

"The brushes are still out there," said Mrs. Velez. "I have not even gone back there."

That was nearly two weeks ago.

For most of last Wednesday – the day Andrew's body arrived in Lubbock – Roy Velez put on a brave front for those around him.

But as the day drew to a close, he knelt over the headstone of his oldest son, Freddie, clutched his hands in prayer, and sobbed.

His wife stood above him running her fingers through his hair and wiping away the tears beneath her sunglasses.

They had just come out of the funeral home nearby where Mr. Velez had identified his son. **Also Online**

"I had them open the bottom part of the casket ... and he had no shoes on, so I was able to see his crooked toes," Mr. Velez said. "I knew that was Andrew. He was the only one in West Texas that had crooked toes.

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"I asked them, 'Please put some shoes on him or at least some socks.' "

The death of his brother, the pressures of war, and being away from his wife and children pushed Andrew to put a squad machine gun in his mouth and end his life almost two weeks ago, the Velez family believes. In addition, Andrew and his wife, Veronica, were having marital problems, Mr. Velez said. Veronica Velez declined to be interviewed.

It was Andrew who had escorted his brother's body back home in November 2004.

"He said, 'Do you know, Dad, how hard it was to talk to Fred when he is in a box of ice?' " Mrs. Velez said. "Imagine, ... [him] going through all of this."

Not long after his brother's death, Andrew, 22, began to have emotional breakdowns and flashbacks.

Mr. Velez said he was told that in one episode, Andrew held his wife, Veronica, hostage in a room.



Army Spc. Andrew Velez (left) and Army Cpl. Jose "Freddie" Velez

In a second one, Mr. Velez said, in an alley behind his in-laws' Lubbock home in December 2005, Andrew believed he was under attack.

"I found him at 3 in the morning," said Mr. Velez, a retired police officer and now a minister. He was "laying on the ground, and he was calling out to, 'Get Down! Get down! Get down! The Hajis are coming! Get Down! ... I'm not going to die. I'm going home. I'm going home to my babies.' "

"We're out there praying over him and hoping that he can snap out of this," Mrs. Velez said. In desperation, the family called the Lubbock Police Department hoping that they could help calm him down.

When police officers responded, Mr. Velez had settled down.

"For some odd reason, he just snapped back into life and went inside and went to sleep," Mr. Velez said.

Growing up

Growing up in Lubbock, Andrew was the cocky one, ready to face any challenge. Fred was the passive one, a team player with the patience of a doctor, which is what he hoped to become after the military, their parents said.

The two were notorious for getting into trouble, "but wanted to earn the respect of everyone on the south side of Lubbock – and they did," Mr. Velez said at Andrew's memorial service.

Both boys were very athletic, Mr. Velez said, competing in high school football, track, wrestling and basketball.

In high school, Fred was in the medical magnet program and Andrew in the criminal justice one – he wanted to be a police officer like his father.

Fred graduated from high school with honors and was accepted to Texas Tech University when he informed his parents that he wanted to serve his country instead.

Andrew moved out at 16 to live with Veronica and her family and help raise their first child. They both went back later for their high school equivalency certificates. The couple married in 2003 and had three children: Jasmine Jade, 5; Jordan Davis, 3; and Jacob Andrew, 2.

As soon as he could, Andrew followed his brother into the military.

They fought like siblings, said their grandfather Roy Velez Sr., but they loved each other.

Carmen Velez – who has two grown children of her own, including one who is a drill instructor in the Army – helped raise the boys from a young age. The Velez brothers have a sister, Monica, now 27. Their mother left them and their father when Andrew was 1.

She recalls Andrew coming in one day from the mall and tapping her on the shoulder. "I looked back, and he said, 'Can I call you Mommy?' "

In one of his last calls home, Andrew talked about having six close calls and thanked her for sending homemade cookies and beef jerky, Mr. Velez said.

"When you hold your sons in your arms, your children, and you love them and they grow up to do what the Lord wills them to do and he brings them back to you in a pine box ... you tend to want to hold them one more time," Mr. Velez said. "To love them one more time. To say some words of wisdom to them one more time."

Memories

Sitting at the kitchen table, Mr. Velez juggled three telephones as he talked about his sons. He recorded the numbers of everyone who called providing support – from all over the U.S. to China, Afghanistan, France and Portugal.

Newspaper clippings, poems and letters covered his end of the table.

Pictures of the two sons, most of them in uniform, are displayed throughout the house. And remnants of their teenage years – a basketball net mounted above the garage and a weight-lifting set in the back yard – are still intact.

Like most empty nesters, Mr. and Mrs. Velez transformed their children's bedrooms: one into a computer room and the other into a sanctuary where Mr. Velez goes early in the morning to pray. Freddie's flag sits atop an entertainment center between his Bronze Star and Purple Heart – replacements for originals that were stolen in a robbery of the house in June.

That room is where Mr. Velez retreated last week after learning of Andrew's death.

When the Velezes learned of Fred's death, it was in a phone call from their daughter, just after ordering a meal at a restaurant in town.

This time, men in uniform arrived at the front door to tell them of Andrew's death.

"It felt like somebody hit me with a sledgehammer, like they opened my mouth and they put chains inside it," Mr. Velez said. "I was beat on the inside as well as the outside. And I knew that somehow or another that my God would have to strengthen me because I became heartless."

Andrew had the option to stay home after his brother died – being the only surviving son. His father, in fact, had asked him not to return to combat. The Velez are the first family to lose two children in the war, according to reports.

But Andrew insisted, Mr. Velez said. He believed terrorism had the potential to spread like a disease in the U.S.

"He said, 'I won't sign it, Daddy,' " of the paper that would have released him from his contract. " '[My] brother's in heaven, I can't bring him back. ... I'm going to pick up where my brother left off.' "

After suffering his episodes, Andrew had been ordered by the military to go through psychological evaluations, Mr. Velez said, and he went for two or three treatments.

"He talked to them and said to them that he was OK with everything that had [taken] place, but yet he was locking up inside," Mr. Velez said. "He wasn't letting that come out of him."

Andrew's case is not unique.

In 2005, 12.9 U.S. soldiers per 100,000 committed suicide, the highest rate for the Army since 1999, when the rate was 13.1 per 100,000. For young males in the U.S., the suicide rate is 19.8 per 100,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Every suicide is difficult and tragic, and our condolences go out to the families who experience it," said Col. Elspeth Ritchie, M.D., a psychiatric consultant to the Army surgeon general. "We are continually looking out for what we can do to meet the needs of our soldiers and how we can improve."

The best resource is often the people who know the soldier best, Col. Ritchie said.

"Some of our best health screeners are a good first sergeant," Col. Ritchie said. "Soldiers are continually in a process of taking care of each other, and a very important part of our mental health care is that soldiers watch out for a buddy."

Mr. Velez said it was a sergeant first class who ordered his son to seek counseling.

Andrew said that counselors put him through all the evaluations and that he would just sit there and listen to them, Mr. Velez said.

"Maybe sometimes it's hard to read a person," he said. "If they would have brought him to me and said, 'Andrew, are you OK?' I knew that there was trouble inside. I knew there was something in his heart that was bothering him. But he, like his brother, wanted to be strong."

Taking his own life makes Andrew no less of a hero, his father said.

"I personally don't think that they should have sent him," Mr. Velez said. "But ... it was a decision of his heart."

"He said, 'You need to tell the people that the face of war is ugly,' " his father said. " 'We're not over here playing games. This is reality.' "

Staff writer David McLemore contributed to this report.

E-mail ccummings@dallasnews.com

HOW SOLDIERS ARE EVALUATED

The Army provides mental health screenings at several points for soldiers being sent to war. Soldiers undergo a series of evaluations before going, while in the war zone and when they return stateside. There is now also a post-redeployment evaluation three to six months after they return. Access to counseling and further evaluation as needed is available all along the line.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health evaluations are handled as closely to the troops as possible, relying on chaplains, senior noncommissioned officers and behavioral health specialists to keep an eye out for those who may need help.

"We've created combat stress control teams in-theater who live and work with soldiers in the forward operating bases as close to the front lines as possible," said Col. Elspeth Ritchie, M.D., psychiatric consultant to the Army surgeon general. "They provide suicide prevention classes, teach stress-management and provide further treatment as necessary."

About 200 people, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and mental health technicians, are assigned to combat stress-control teams in Iraq. An additional 25 are assigned to Afghanistan.

Military OneSource, a Web-based resource for a variety of services for military families, also provides a 24-hour contact number, 1-800-342-9647, to arrange for confidential counseling for soldiers exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress or suicidal tendencies.