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Jan. 27: This Marine's death came after he served in Iraq

Kevin Giles, Star Tribune

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At first, Jonathan Schulze tried to live with the nightmares and the grief he brought home from Iraq. He was a tough kid from central Minnesota, and more than that, a U.S. Marine to the core.

Yet his moods when he returned home told another story. He sobbed on his parents' couch as he told them how fellow Marines had died, and how he, a machine gunner, had killed the enemy. In his sleep, he screamed the names of dead comrades. He had visited a psychiatrist at the VA hospital in Minneapolis.

Two weeks ago, Schulze went to the VA hospital in St. Cloud. He told a staff member he was thinking of killing himself, and asked to be admitted to the mental health unit, said his father and stepmother, who accompanied him. They said he was told he couldn't be admitted that day. The next day, as he spoke to a counselor in St. Cloud by phone, he was told he was No. 26 on the waiting list, his parents said.

Four days later, Schulze, 25, committed suicide in his New Prague home.

Citing privacy laws, Veterans Affairs officials wouldn't comment specifically on the case, nor would they confirm or deny the Schulze family's account. However, Dr. Sherrie Herendeen, line director for mental health services at the St. Cloud hospital, said Thursday that under VA policy, a veteran talking about suicide would immediately be escorted into the hospital's locked mental health unit for treatment.

She also said that after hearing of Schulze's death, the hospital is doing an internal review of its procedures.

Schulze's father and stepmother, Jim and Marianne Schulze of rural Stewart, Minn., say their son would be alive today if the VA had acted on his pleas for admittance. They say they heard him tell VA staff in St. Cloud that he felt suicidal -- in person on Jan. 11 at the hospital, and over the phone on Jan. 12.

On the evening of Jan. 16, Schulze called family and friends to tell them that he was preparing to kill himself. They called New Prague police, who smashed in the door and found him hanging from an electrical cord. Police attempted to resuscitate him, but it was too late.

Schulze's family doctor in Stewart, a farming crossroads in McLeod County, said he was convinced that Schulze suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, a disabling mental condition that can result from military combat.

"Jonathan was a classic," said Dr. William Phillips, who said he first examined Schulze in October 2004 when Schulze was home on leave from Marine duty.

Phillips said Schulze was reliving combat in his sleep, had flashbacks when he was awake, couldn't eat, felt paranoid, struggled with relationships and admitted to drinking alcohol excessively. Phillips prescribed medication to calm his nerves and help him sleep.

The doctor also asked Schulze to seek counseling at Camp Pendleton, the Marine Corps base in California where he was assigned. Phillips said he was unable to learn whether Schulze had done so.

"We don't have a system for this," Phillips said this week. "The VA is overwhelmed, and we're rural doctors out here trying to deal with this. Unfortunately, we're going to see a lot of Jonathans."

Seeking help

Maj. Cynthia Rasmussen, the combat stress officer for the 88th Regional Readiness Command at Fort Snelling, said veterans returning to Minnesota who have problems often don't seek help until their civilian lives begin to fall apart. "Soldiers think if they go to get help that they're going to be seen as weak, but they also think their command won't have faith in them," she said.

Rasmussen said reasons for mental illness among returning veterans are many and complex, but often relate to personality changes that service members must make while in uniform -- and especially in combat zones -- and then try to readjust to civilian life.

After Schulze left the Marines in late 2005, he continued to have aching memories of combat.

"When he got back from Iraq he was mentally scattered," said his older brother Travis, who also served there with the Marines.

Much of Jonathan Schulze's anguish seemed to relate to combat in Ramadi in April 2004. Schulze, who carried a heavy machine gun, wrote his parents that 16 Marines, many of them close friends, had died in two afternoons of firefights and bombings. Twice he was wounded but didn't tell his parents, not wanting them to worry. He wrote them about dismembered bodies. About youth and combat and disillusionment. And about the bombs.

"I pray so much over here and ask God to keep me out of harm's way and to make it back home alive and in one piece," he wrote Jim and Marianne in May 2004. "I bet I easily pray over a dozen times a day and I always pray while I am on patrol as I am terrified of getting hit by an IED aka a bomb. Our vehicle elements and Marines on patrols are getting hit hard by these bombs the Iraqis plant all over and hide on the ground."

Schulze carried guilt that fellow Marines died. He wanted to return to Iraq to somehow redeem himself, said his father, who did three tours of duty in Vietnam.

Because of that, Schulze at first resisted counseling, Jim Schulze said: "Being a Marine, he was too proud to get help. They want to make you impervious of any emotion. And when you get out it's almost impossible to put it back the way it was."

When Schulze left the Marine Corps, he participated in military color guards, visited aging veterans in the state homes, helped anyone in need. He worked with his stepfather building houses. An unmarried father, Schulze bragged of adoration for his young daughter, Kaley Marie, on his MySpace website.

But the war always got in the way of a normal life.

Schulze was on an emotional roller coaster and couldn't get off, said his close Marine friend from Iraq, Eric Satersmoen, who with Schulze's stepbrothers described him as becoming uncharacteristically quiet.

"Lot of inner turmoil, lot of flashbacks, lot of nightmares," was how Jim Schulze described his son.

The Jan. 11 visit to the VA in St. Cloud came a few weeks after Jonathan Schulze waited for more than three hours at the VA hospital in Minneapolis, hoping to be admitted, Jim Schulze said. His son last saw a psychiatrist at the Minneapolis VA on Dec. 14 but someone there told him he couldn't be admitted for treatment until March, Jim Schulze said. They went to St. Cloud with the expectation that Jonathan could be admitted quicker.

Satersmoen and Travis Schulze think that Jonathan Schulze didn't intend to kill himself. They said that he was drunk and confused and speculate that he unintentionally blacked out before police arrived.

Secondary causes of death, said the Minnesota Regional Coroner's Office in Hastings, were post-traumatic stress disorder and acute and chronic alcoholism.

At the funeral in Prior Lake, Schulze lay in his Marine dress blues, two Purple Hearts and his other medals pinned to his tunic. Dozens of young men -- fellow Marines -- gathered in groups to tell stories. They called him Jonny. He was funny, they said. The life of the party.

Cold wind ripped across the cemetery in Stewart where he was buried. Veterans from the Hutchinson, Minn., VFW fired a three-volley salute. Travis Schulze, dressed in black, and Satersmoen, wearing Marine dress blues, removed the flag from the casket and folded it. Travis Schulze presented the flag to his father. And saluted him.

"He was a delayed casualty of the Iraq war," Jim Schulze said of Jonathan.

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