

washingtonpost.com

## Army Gives Family 'No Answers' in Suicide

By Theola S. Labbe  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, November 11, 2004; Page A01

Advertisement

Get more than just speed with  
**Verizon High-Speed Internet**  [Learn More](#)

KATY, Tex. -- Carol Coons keeps her son's dog tags and framed photo in the living room, on the same shelf as the dried roses from his memorial service.

She keeps her file folder in a kitchen drawer. "I call this my investigation folder," she said, pulling it out, dog-eared and thick with research, scribbled names and notes from her many phone calls to Washington officials. "We just had all these questions, and they had no answers."

On June 21, 2003, the Army evacuated Master Sgt. James Curtis Coons, 36, from Kuwait after he overdosed on sleeping pills. He told doctors he was seeing the shattered face of a dead soldier in the mirror. They diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder, sent him to a hospital in Germany and then to their premier treatment facility, Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Northwest Washington. By July 4 he was dead, hanging from a bedsheet in his room at Mologne House, a hotel for outpatients and families on the grounds of Walter Reed.

Nineteen months later, Carol Coons and her husband, Richard, have not given up their quest for answers. Why wasn't her son admitted as an inpatient? Why, after four days of worried phone calls, did it finally take a 2 a.m. call from his wife to get someone to check on him? How long had he been dead before his body was found?

James's widow, Robin, has another question, not about how her husband died but how he is remembered. Today, as the nation honors the service and sacrifice of its veterans, she wants to know: After 17 years of military service, after a Bronze Star awarded for Operation Iraqi Freedom, why is the name of James Coons not counted among the Iraq war dead?

"That really makes me angry. How can he not be put in there as a casualty of war? I don't understand that," Robin said. "It's like, because he did that to himself, he's forgotten."

### 'His Life Was the Army'

The boy his parents called Jimmy seemed destined for the military. At 5, he was enthralled with helicopters and practiced parachute jumps from backyard trees. As a teenager, he displayed a fastidiousness unusual for his years. "He would fold his dirty clothes before putting them in the hamper," said Carol Coons, 55.

He entered the Army in 1987, right after high school, and spent a short time as a field artilleryman before switching to the specialty that would define his military career, the signal corps. It required attention to detail as well as a way with people. For Coons, working on the computer systems that allowed soldiers to communicate with each other seemed a natural fit.

As a member of the 385th Signal Company, he was stationed in Texas and Japan before moving on to Carlisle Barracks in Carlisle, Pa. Don Watkins, the command sergeant major of the post, was Coons's next-door neighbor there and became his close friend. In the evenings, the men would chat at the chain-link fence. Coons confided his goal of reaching the rank of sergeant major.

"He was an outstanding, dedicated soldier," said Watkins, now retired. "His life was the Army, and he always wanted to go to the top."

Watkins selected Coons as the first sergeant of the company, putting him in charge of 125 soldiers. Coons was 6-foot-2 and handsome. He looked like a recruiting poster for the military.

"Everything was squared away," said Sgt. Hector Pedroza, 24, who worked under Coons.

He had a no-nonsense attitude with his soldiers, Pedroza said, but he was also approachable. Pedroza sought out Coons when he was unsure whether to marry his military girlfriend because he feared that they would be separated. Coons urged him to make the commitment, and after Pedroza did, his wife got pregnant, which helped get them placed together.

"He was my role model," Pedroza said. "A lot of things that I did, I thought, 'What would he do?'"

Coons and his wife, Robin, 29, a former preschool teacher whom he met when he worked as a military recruiter in Texas, lived on the Pennsylvania base with his daughter from a previous marriage. He and Robin had a second daughter in 2001.

"He called us 'his girls,'" Robin said. "He just always let us know how much he loved us."

Coons also played the prankster. In family portraits with Robin and the children, he would pose bug-eyed. He once mooned the children at an extended family party. Still, even at home, the military influence ran deep. He had his children stand in line, backs straight, chests out, eyes forward, then would tell them to relax. Laughing, Robin would admonish: "They're not your soldiers, they're your daughters."

He had one blemish on his military career: In 1990, when he was 22, he was sentenced to 90 days in jail and paid a \$1,150 fine for a DWI offense while stationed at Fort Hood, Tex. His mother said he had turned down his father's offer of a lawyer because he wanted to accept the full punishment. "He liked to take care of things properly," she said.

After three years in Pennsylvania, when the time came for Coons to be deployed again, he had a choice of Korea or Kuwait. He chose Kuwait. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Robin said, "he wanted to be a part of that."

He arrived at Camp Doha in Kuwait in July. The signals corps there had already supported several missions in Afghanistan. But the country was on the brink of a much bigger war.

#### **'Our Rock of Gibraltar'**

In the months leading up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, Camp Doha was bustling. Members of the 385th Signal Company readied telephones, computers and other communication infrastructure. Coons supervised the soldiers and civilian contractors on the base, working more than 100 hours a week in the desert heat. At night, the troops slept in bunkers to avoid incoming missiles.

Coons called his wife at least once a week. Always organized, he kept scribbled notes in his planner and reminded Robin about dentist and doctor appointments for the children. Coons also spoke often with his father; Richard, 56, had served in the signals corps in Vietnam, and the two men compared notes.

"The closer it got to the actual conflict, you could tell that he was pumped up, he really wanted to talk," Richard said.

Coons was patriotic and eager. "What I do now is not about me. It's about the American flag," Coons wrote to his mother in February. In an e-mail two days before the invasion, he wrote: "I am very proud to have this opportunity to serve and lead soldiers into possible combat."

The military recognized Coons's leadership during Operation Iraqi Freedom with a Bronze Star. "His actions ensured complete dominance and victory on the battlefield," the citation reads.

But the flush of victory had worn off by June, and the bodies of soldiers killed during the occupation arrived at the Camp Doha morgue.

Coons set up the morgue communications network. One time, he asked a morgue worker to show him a body so he could pay his respects. He told his friend Carol Hairston, a contractor, that he couldn't get the image out of his mind. "He said he would go home and dream about them, and it felt like he was in a nightmare."

At first he couldn't sleep. According to Coons's medical records, he went to a doctor on June 1 complaining of headaches and stress. The doctor diagnosed depression and prescribed an antidepressant, possible counseling and a follow-up visit in two weeks.

Coons was close to going home. The unit was scheduled to return at the end of the month, and he had trained his replacement. He would be reunited with his family and had been accepted to the Army's Sergeant Majors Academy, the realization of his longtime dream. He would start in January.

But he was haunted by the mutilated face. When he looked in the mirror, according to his medical records, he saw the face of the corpse instead of his own. On June 17, he took 10 sleeping pills and then had his stomach pumped at the base hospital. "I just wanted to make it stop," he said, according to his medical records.

Lt. Col. Anthony R. Williams, commander of the 54th Signal Battalion, went to the hospital that night. When doctors told him that Coons had tried to hurt himself, "I was blown away," Williams said. "I saw him every day, and he performed above and beyond. I never saw a sign of someone under stress. He was our Rock of Gibraltar."

Doctors labeled it a "suicidal gesture" and admitted Coons as a psychiatric patient for four days. At first, Coons denied that he had intended to kill himself and seemed anxious about how the incident could affect his military career.

But after the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, he said he realized that he needed help. Under constant observation, Coons isolated himself in the hospital, slept for hours and refused to participate in ward activities.

He was evacuated to Germany, where he stayed for several days, and called his family and friends.

"He told me he was sick, and when I asked him about it, he said, 'I'll tell you about it when I get home,'" said Richard Coons.

Robin said she last spoke to her husband on June 28. He told her he was headed for Walter Reed.

"I asked him if he wanted me to meet him, and he said no, because he thought he would only be there for a few

days. He said he would call when he arrived, or would have someone else call if he couldn't," Robin said.

Her phone never rang.

Coons was evacuated from Germany on June 30, and his medical report said, "Not an imminent risk to self/others."

### **'It's an Insult'**

Exhibit 32 of the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Report referring to July 4, 2003:

"At about 2:15 a.m., lady called who said she was the wife of Rm 179 (Coon). . . . She wanted to know if anyone had seen him since he checked in on the 30th. I asked housekeeping to go over and check it out. Door was bolted from inside. . . . We waited a while then . . . got permission to get key."

Exhibit 6 of the report:

"I opened the door, and noticed a strong smell of decay, then saw the body of a male hanging by the neck just inside the door. I immediately closed the door and went . . . to contact the police."

The report cleared a Walter Reed doctor of negligent homicide in Coons's death.

Walter Reed responded to five requests for an interview with a written statement issued yesterday through the U.S. Army: "To minimize the risk of suicide" among psychiatric patients, "we do a thorough clinical assessment, referral to an appropriate level of care, and monitoring for changes in risk status. Regrettably, even with the highest level of care, suicide is not always predictable or preventable."

No suicides have occurred at the hospital since January, the statement said. Another soldier reportedly killed himself then.

Coons's autopsy, performed by the office of the D.C. medical examiner, lists the date of death as July 4, the day the body was found. At the request of The Washington Post, the coroner of Allegheny County, Pa., Cyril H. Wecht, reviewed the autopsy and said the level of decomposition suggested that Coons had been dead "at least 72 hours."

Coons missed a doctor's appointment July 1, according to the investigation report, which does not address whether anyone followed up. The date of death matters greatly to his mother, who spoke of her son's patriotism. "For someone to say he died on the Fourth of July, it's an insult to his memory," she said. "He loved this country."

Peter Anderson, general manager of Mologne House, did not return calls seeking comment.

Richard, Carol and Robin Coons visited Walter Reed the month after James died but came away unsatisfied. "If somebody screwed up, be man enough to tell me you screwed up and my son fell through the cracks, and this is what we're going to do to make sure that it doesn't happen again," Richard Coons said.

No public announcement was made about Coons's death, and his name does not appear on the official Department of Defense listing of Iraq war dead.

A Defense Department official said yesterday that the department is revising its casualty policy and considering whether to include "mental health casualties" -- soldiers who served in war and died by suicide outside the combat zone. The policy now recognizes soldiers who commit suicide only while in the war zone. If Coons had died in Kuwait from his overdose, the Army would have considered him a war casualty.

But each service branch has some discretion in how it classifies deaths. Col. Joseph G. Curtin, an Army spokesman, said the Army review board "is willing to communicate with the family on this matter."

*Staff researcher Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.*

© 2004 The Washington Post Company