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Soldier's suicide shocks Pa. town

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

EAST BERLIN, Pa. — People in this tiny colonial village near the battlefields of Gettysburg are of two minds about the death of Corey Small, their only native son lost to the war in Iraq.



Chaplain Ted Bowers of the VFW chapter in East Berlin, Pa., salutes the casket of Army Pfc. Corey Small.

By Christopher Glass, York Daily Record via AP

Word has spread that the 20-year-old Army private first class was not killed in combat July 3, but died by his own hand. "We're a small community, and news travels fast," Mayor Keith Hoffman said. "It was a shock."

Small's family declined to comment, but military sources have confirmed that his death was suicide. There has been a rash of suicides among troops serving in Iraq since hostilities began there in March. In response, a team of U.S. doctors in Iraq is investigating.

To many in East Berlin, reports that Small committed suicide only deepened the tragedy of losing a young man who was married and the father of a 4-year-old boy. Others feel differently. There are some members of the local American Legion chapter in Lake Meade, a gated community nearby, who want to halt plans for naming that post after Small.

"To some people, suicide does make a difference, unfortunately," said Ted Bowers. He is a member of the American Legion Post and the East Berlin chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, where he is post chaplain. A retired Naval officer and veteran of the first Gulf War, Bowers spoke at Small's funeral in July.

He said it shouldn't matter how the soldier died and believes most in town agree. "The (larger) sense of the community probably would be that here's someone who served his country and became a casualty of the war on terrorism," Bowers said. "We need to pay our respects and honor this person."

Americans are dying in Iraq any number of ways, from AK-47 fire to rocket-propelled grenades, from illness and heat exhaustion to heart attacks and car accidents. Since May 1, 188 U.S. military personnel have died — 94 in combat and 94 in non-combat situations.

Suicide is another category, although the Army appears reluctant to discuss it. Until last week, the Army refused to say how many troops in Iraq have committed suicide, arguing that any release of information would compromise cases under investigation.

But recognizing that there could be a problem, the Army has made public the number of suicides during Operation Iraqi

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Freedom. It estimates a minimum of 11 suicides since hostilities began. The Marine Corps has confirmed three suicides among its ground forces. The Navy is investigating one possible case. There are inquiries into other questionable deaths.

Small and his wife, Amanda, were living in Fort Polk, La., where he was a member of the 502nd Military Intelligence Company, 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment. Small was deployed to Iraq in May. By July, he was encamped in an abandoned hospital in Baghdad, where there was no running water or electricity. He died there July 3 from what the Army said was a non-combat cause.

In addition to confirmation that his death was a suicide from military sources, an account published by the *Gettysburg Times* tells of a soldier believed to be Small who shot himself July 3 after calling the USA. The suicide took place in front of other troops waiting to use the telephone.

Jodie and Jack Orner, Small's mother and stepfather, live in East Berlin. Small's son from a previous relationship, Jayden Klunk, divides time between his grandparents and his mother in nearby Hanover, said Ken Morgan, a family friend. "He's a nice little kid, and it's a shame," Morgan said. "He realizes his dad is gone."

The last local believed to have been killed during war was Richard Gross, an Army airman who died in World War II. The VFW post was named for him. The local American Legion had plans of doing the same to honor Small. "His death really brought the price of this war to a small community," said B.J. Small, editor of the *Gettysburg Times*. "It was front-page news."

A hundred people turned out for Small's funeral, and efforts were started to raise funds for the soldier's young son. A Jayden Klunk Trust Fund was established, currently in care of the Community Bank, 100 East King St. A local Harley-Davidson dealership held a sandwich sale that brought in \$300.

A friend of the soldier's family, Keri Ernst, held a cut-a-thon at a hairstyle shop she operates in nearby McSherrystown and raised \$818. "I've never been in a situation where any of my family was at war," Ernst said. "But I just think it's got to be an awful experience."

Rutter's Farm, a chain of stores around the area, put out jars for people to donate money. So far, more than \$3,000 has been raised at the stores.

Within weeks, however, word filtered out that the death may have been suicide. There have been various reactions. "A lot of people can't understand how a man in a war would take his own life," said Morgan, who is an Army veteran of the Vietnam War.

Some people began to distance themselves from the loss. "Why would they (the community) make a big hero out of him?" said one World War II veteran who asked not be identified.

Others see it as a byproduct of war.

"He was still a boy from our town. He was still in uniform," said Linda Heckman, an Army veteran of the first Gulf War and commander of the VFW post here. "We're proud of him, and we're proud of his service. And we're sorry for the family. I mean, it's horrible."

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