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Michael Bramer, at 23; strove to cope after injury in Iraq

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By Bryan Marquard, Globe Staff | January 30, 2007

The first time that Michael J. Bramer died, he was serving in Iraq, his sister said, and he felt a tranquillity that was elusive in the months after he was brought back to life.

"What he talked about in the beginning was the feeling he felt when his heart stopped," said Barbara Bramer of Boston. "He said it was just very peaceful for him, and that was his expectation of what he would have had if they didn't revive him."

Then a sergeant first class in special forces with the Army's 82d Airborne Division, Mr. Bramer suffered severe head injuries in October 2003, when part of an unstable structure collapsed as he was helping string barbed wire outside Baghdad, his sister said. The impact blinded him in one eye. During surgery, plates were placed in his head. Soon, a series of migraines, each more acute, disturbed his days and nights.

Discharged from the Army in June, Mr. Bramer had been living in a Fayetteville, N.C., apartment. At 23, he had set aside his hopes of attending MIT, where he had taken summer courses during high school in Boston. On Jan. 17, while his roommate and a friend were downstairs, he turned up the surround sound on his television and took his life in his bedroom, his sister said.

"He was loved and respected by everyone who knew him, especially by his family," said his father, Nelson of Brewster. "I just hope he knew it, that's all."

"I spoke with Michael a couple of weeks before everything happened, and he hoped to come home for his birthday on Feb. 15," said his mother, Janis McQuarrie of Boston. "He was going to be 24."

Mischievous as a child, Mr. Bramer "was always a fun-loving kid and made friends easily," she said.

"He was probably the most compassionate and loving person you could ever hope to know," his sister said.

As a teenager growing up in Brighton, he was captivated by physics, she said. "He kind of expected everybody else to have that same fascination -- 'Don't you understand how cool this is?'"

School held less allure.

"He's very intellectually gifted," his mother said, "but he found it very boring and tedious to sit in the class."

When Mr. Bramer graduated from ABCD University High School, an alternative school in Boston, he faced the challenge of finding the money to attend college. "I think he believed the recruiter, that he was going to be able to get the money for school and earn credits," his mother said.

He enlisted in the Army in 2001, his mother said, and later decided to pursue a combat role as a paratrooper.

"He didn't just want to be doing a military job," his sister said. "He wanted to be doing what the military was, serving his country."

Mr. Bramer served in Afghanistan for several months beginning in mid-2002, she said, and went to Iraq in late summer 2003. When the accident occurred, "they had to shock him to get his heart going again," she said. "He told me that they did not expect him to make it at that time. They brought him to a ward of the hospital where they were bringing the mortally wounded soldiers."

Mr. Bramer was moved to a hospital in Germany, then to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. When he was released from the hospital, Mr. Bramer was stationed in North Carolina at Fort Bragg, home of the 82d Airborne, and there the safety net that had sustained him in the military seemed to fray. No one appeared to grasp the severity of his injury, his sister said.

He received a medical discharge last summer and just after Christmas spent a week in Los Angeles.

Friends told Mr. Bramer's mother and sister that he had been suffering anxiety attacks and had a mild heart attack last month.

"He was also experiencing the migraines in a greater intensity," his mother said. "And the doctors told him that they weren't going to get better, they were going to get worse."

After being injured in Iraq, "possibly he had convinced himself that he should not have gone on longer after the accident, especially with the pain all the time," his sister said.

Meanwhile, the memory lingered of the peace he had felt when his heart stopped.

"I think in terms of how his mind was perceiving, it was a comparison," his sister said. "He could have that if he died."

In addition to his father, mother, and sister Barbara, Mr. Bramer leaves his grandmothers, Virginia A. McQuarrie of Bath, Maine, and Grace I. Bramer of Warminster, Pa.; three other sisters, Sheila McQuarrie of Boston, and Alyssa and Noelle of Brewster; and three brothers, Bailey and Karl of Lexington, and Brenden of Brewster.

A funeral Mass will be said at 10 a.m. Thursday in St. Mary Church in Bath, Maine. Burial will be in Oak Grove Cemetery in Bath. ■

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