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Local News

May 29, 2007 7:02 pm US/Central

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MN Guard Member Shot On I-94 Had Suicidal Past

Minneapolis (AP) — A Minnesota National Guard member killed in a standoff with police in central Minnesota was suicidal in the past, and initial reports indicated he was intoxicated and driving with a loaded shotgun on the morning of his death, authorities said Tuesday.

But Spc. Brian William Skold, 28, of Sauk Rapids, was also a caring person, who loved water-skiing, fishing and hunting, and drew people in with his outgoing personality.

"He had just a zest for life," said his sister, Jenny Trager. "People really liked him. I guess he would be what I would call a social butterfly. ... He enjoyed being with friends and family."

Skold served about a year in Iraq. Police weren't saying whether lingering effects from his deployment contributed to Sunday morning's incident along Interstate 94, in which he fled from authorities and fired at least one shot from a 12-gauge shotgun before police returned fire, killing him.

But veterans' groups and families who have lost loved ones say the number of troops struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health issues is on the rise, and many of those people aren't getting enough help from the Pentagon and the Veterans Affairs Department. Earlier this month, a Pentagon task force warned that the military health care system is overburdened and not sufficient to meet the needs of troops suffering from such issues. In addition, some troops don't seek help, feeling they may be stigmatized.

"The tragedy of war is far more than just the death of people," said the Rev. Bob Goblirsch, who was Skold's pastor when the boy was growing up in Madison, in rural western Minnesota. Goblirsch said that being in combat changes people — even those who return seemingly intact. "The punishment of war is far greater than we can imagine."

Skold, a graduate of Lac qui Parle Valley High School, enlisted in the Minnesota Army National Guard on Dec. 30, 1998. He was in the 1st Battalion, 151st Field Artillery, based in Montevideo, said Lt. Col. Kevin Olson, the Minnesota National Guard spokesman.

Skold was deployed from November 2004 through December 2005 and was stationed in Baghdad, Olson said. At the time of his death, Skold was a National Guard member in good standing with the military. Trager said her brother was proud of his military service and had recently re-enlisted.

Skold's younger brother, Jeremy, is also in the National Guard and was deployed with him, she said. Pictures of the two brothers have been hanging in the back of St. Michael's Church in Madison since they were deployed.

Brian Skold was recently divorced and had four children, Trager said.

"He was a great uncle," said Trager, 34, of Appleton.



Authorities negotiated with h hour and a half but he refus CBS

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The Douglas County Sheriff's Department and the Alexandria Police Department on Tuesday gave this account of Sunday's events:

— Authorities in Douglas County got a report shortly before 4 a.m. Sunday from the Benton County Sheriff's Department and the Sauk Rapids Police Department, saying that Skold was intoxicated, possibly had a loaded shotgun, and was headed to the Brooten or Alexandria area. The report also said Skold had a history of being suicidal.

— At about 4:30 a.m., a Stearns County deputy reported Skold's 1994 Chevy Silverado pickup truck had been located. Authorities followed Skold's truck into the Lake Bergen rest area on Interstate 94, just east of Alexandria.

— Police said the family had been on a cell phone with Skold. Family members told police that Skold had a shotgun in his vehicle.

— Police began negotiating with Skold at the Lake Bergen rest area, but they were unsuccessful. The Douglas County SWAT team was called to assist.

— Shortly before 5 a.m., Skold drove away, and into the city of Alexandria. Police followed as he turned around and headed back toward the Interstate, entering eastbound I-94 going toward Osakis. Authorities used stop sticks to stop the truck.

— Authorities negotiated with him for 90 minutes, but he wouldn't surrender. During this time, Skold got out of his truck several times with a 12-gauge shotgun. He fired at least one shot, before Alexandria police officers returned fire.

The two officers were put on paid administrative leave pending an investigation. Sgt. Chad Schroeder has been on the department for 10 years, and Officer Tony Kuhnau has been with the department for five years.

"We extend our sincere condolences to the family members of Brian Skold," said Alexandria Police Chief Richard Wyffels.

Services for Skold were pending.

On Tuesday, Trager remembered her brother as someone with high energy, able to get by on just a few hours of sleep.

"I think the thing that sticks out for me is just his personality," she said. "He was so outgoing. I liked that about him. He didn't care what anybody thought. He was Brian. ... I guess that's something I always envied about him, was his zest for life."

She said he enjoyed deer hunting and fishing, and spent a lot of time at the family's cabin at Benson.

"He was always out in the boat," she said, and he always stayed up late talking with the neighbors. "He loved doing the skiing and the kneeboarding and anything like that out there."

"He will be missed by a lot of people," she said.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the Iraq war contributed to Skold's behavior, but more and more troops are experiencing mental health issues when they return home from war zones. Paul Rieckhoff, executive director and founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said suicides among troops returning from the war is a significant problem, but the scope is unknown because there is no method to track the data.

One Minnesotan, Marine Jonathan Schulze of New Prague, Minn., tried to get help for mental distress after he came home from Iraq. His parents say he asked to be admitted to a VA hospital but was turned away twice. The VA disputes that. The Marine hanged himself in January at the age of 25.