

Military Police Soldier Killed in Iraqi Ambush

Veteran NCO is NY National Guard's First Combat Casualty since Korean War

By Lt. Col. Paul Fanning
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SOUTH OF BAGHDAD, IRAQ

The New York Army National Guard suffered its first combat casualty in more than 50 years following an ambush in Iraq on July 27.

Sergeant Heath McMillin, age 29 and father of three from Clifton Springs, was patrolling a convoy route 20 miles south of Baghdad with other members of his unit, the 105th Military Police Company, when an explosive device was triggered next to his humvee. The blast ripped through the vehicle, mortally wounding McMillin and injuring Spec. Brett Goheen from Medina.

"The vehicle was in bad shape," said Sgt. Fred Salber, a member of McMillin's platoon, a friend and former civilian co-worker of McMillin's sister-in-law back in Canandaigua. Salber was called up with McMillin and the rest of the unit in January as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom and both were team leaders. Salber was later chosen by the unit commander to accompany Sgt. McMillin's body home for the funeral on August 4.

"After the blast, Belliard was able to drive the vehicle for a couple of hundred meters with all the tires flat, just to get out of the kill zone," said Salber. Specialist Anthony Belliard, a Rochester police officer, normally drives Salber's humvee. On that day he switched with McMillin's regular driver, Spec. Pedro Quinones, who is also from Rochester. After coming to a stop, the humvee that was behind them rushed forward and the soldiers immediately began to care for McMillin.

"Even though he was wounded with a burst eardrum and shrapnel in his side, Goheen stayed in the turret at his Mark 19 (grenade launcher) providing security, monitoring his sector, and calling out for others to check Sergeant Mack," said Salber. Finally, Goheen was ordered down and the medics examined him. "Mack was already gone," he added.

A Real Pro

Sergeant Heath McMillin had joined the New York Army National Guard after four years of active duty in the Marine Corps. Like all others from his unit, McMillin was called up following the terrorist attacks on 9-11 at the World Trade Center in New York and served two weeks of state active duty there.

"He was very proud of his time in the Marine Corps and he joined the Guard to continue his service," said Kelly McMillin, Heath's wife. "That is him. He really cared about serving, and when 9-11 happened, he just went forward like all the rest."

"Mack was in good shape. He always was athletic, and he was especially good with the younger troops," said Salber. "He developed them, taught them discipline and

skills and gave them confidence. He was absolutely loyal and didn't mince words. He would say what he needed to, and when he needed to. He had a calming affect on the nervous and was a good instructor. He was especially good on the guns," he added. "When the patrol and the medics' vehicle got back to camp, word got around fast about what had happened. We were shocked, all of us," said Salber.



Members of the New York National Guard's military forces honor guard join with family members to farewell Sgt. Heath McMillin at his funeral service in Canandaigua, New York. McMillin was killed in an ambush while serving with the 105th Military Police Company in Iraq. Photo by Lt. Col. Paul Fanning.

Full Military Honors

The McMillin family learned of the tragedy from an active duty Army Casualty Notification Officer appointed by Fort Drum. A Casualty Assistance NCO from the New York Army National Guard from Rochester was appointed to help the family. "We knew that you would want to handle this support because the deceased was one of your own," said Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty, the 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum installation public affairs officer. Capt. Mike Fowler, the unit commander in Iraq called Kelly McMillin to convey sympathy, to explain what had happened and answer questions. Fowler is a deputy sheriff from Monroe County. Calling the family was his idea and something he felt he had to do. "His call helped a lot," said Kelly. "Hearing what happened from him meant a lot to me and the other family members," she said.

Governor George Pataki also called Kelly to express his sympathy and his gratitude for Sgt. McMillin's service to the state and to the nation. There were other calls from members of New York's congressional delegation. The messages of sympathy, the support from friends in the community and, even though the family declined most press invitations for interviews, the news stories in area newspapers and television news programs were well regarded by family members.

At the request of Kelly McMillin to honor her late husband's memory and his dedication to military service, a military funeral was provided with full honors. The military honor detail included members of the New York Army National Guard and the U.S. Marine Corps—in honor of Sgt. McMillin's Marine Corps service. Military honors were rendered at the arrival of the sergeant's body at the Rochester International Airport and subsequent escort to

the Patrick-Halstead funeral home in Manchester. Military honor guards were posted at the funeral home entrance and next to the coffin during the viewing hours for the family and later to the public. There was a military escort to St. Mary's Church in Canandaigua where the funeral was held with military pallbearers, a color guard, and honor guard lining the steps, and then onto St. Rose Cemetery in Shortsville, where a full firing party from the Guard rendered a salute and an Army Reserve musician played taps. A "missing man" helicopter fly over was also provided from the Guard's Rochester-based flight facility. The colors were folded and presented to Sgt. McMillin's widow by The Adjutant General following the presentation of the Army Purple Heart and Bronze Star medals.

The funeral at St. Mary's Church was crowded to the point of overflowing. Participating officials included Governor George Pataki, Maj. Gen. Thomas Maguire, The Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Donald Ryder, the Commanding General of the Army's Criminal Investigation Command from Fort Belvoir, VA and Col. Emory Helton, the 10th Mountain Division garrison commander at Fort Drum.

There were many other Guard officers, NCOs and enlisted members who joined the hundreds of area veterans, civic leaders, family members of other deployed National Guard members from the 105th MP Company and other units and members of the community who attended the funeral.

During his funeral address, Governor Pataki referred to Sgt. McMillin as a quiet hero, as one of the courageous members of the Guard he had called to state active duty on 9-11, 2001 to go to New York City while others "were leaving in fear." The Governor posthumously awarded the New York State Medal of Valor to Sgt. McMillin and presented the medal to his wife at the church on behalf of the State of New York.

"What makes this country great is the brave men and women of our country who put on the uniform," said the Governor. "We will never forget him. We will always honor his memory," he said.

Sgt. McMillin is survived by his father Mark and step-mother Deborah, his mother Etta LaMott and her longtime companion Ray Croteau, his wife Kelly Crowley McMillin and three children Mary, age seven from Phelps, Robert, age three from California and Michael, 11 months. Sgt. McMillin also had four siblings, brothers Jason and John from Clifton Springs and Lyons and sisters Jennifer McMillin from Rochester and Cassie Sabatino of Maine.