



Sgt. Gregory N. Braun
April, 2005 in Samarra, Iraq

Photo/Courtesy Braun Family

Gregory N. Braun

Found Eternal Peace March 6, 2006 at the age of 26 years. Beloved son of Greg and Linda (nee Sable) Braun. Loving brother of Katie Braun. Dear grandnephew of Ruth Shully. Further survived by aunts, uncles, cousins, other relatives and many dear friends. Gregory was an Army Ranger and served his country in Kosovo and Iraq. He was a police officer for the City of Milwaukee and a graduate of Dominican High School.

Visitation Sat., March 11 at Corpus Christi Catholic Church, 8607 W. Villard Ave. from 9-11 AM followed by Mass of Christian Burial at 11 AM. In lieu of flowers, memorials to the Jason Monreal Police Scholarship Fund, W212 S7474 Annes Way, Muskego, WI 53150.

SCHRAMKA FUNERAL HOME

Milwaukee (414)464-4040

Ode to Gregory N. Braun 1979-2006

My former co-worker, Gregory N. Braun, committed suicide on March 6th, 2006. I only heard about it yesterday. He was only 26. I thought he was a little older.

He was a good man. He was full of life, but what happened to him in Iraq, caused him a great deal of pain and he couldn't take it anymore. I will forever miss him, and he will always be a hero to me.

Greg was a Sgt. in the Army National Guard. He did two tours in Iraq. He was also a local Police Officer for the city of Milwaukee.

Apparently, there was a child that was walking up to him and his partner with his hands behind his back. They were ordering this kid to show his hands but he didn't comply. In the time of war, you cannot make that assumption that a child is not a threat. Greg had no choice and shot and killed the kid. The boy was 8 years old and was carrying a soda to him. How was he to know? I wouldn't have known that. Would you?

Half of his unit was killed over there too. But this little boy was the straw that broke the camel's back. I feel for his parents, especially his mother, who found Greg.

Greg, you may find comfort and peace with the angels. You will be missed. Until I see you again, my friend, guard those gates until I get there. Miss you!!

March 16, 2006

Blog: Y! ID: akroncke71, Yahoo 360 Beta

Horrors of war silenced soldier's life

April 29, 2006

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Greg Braun believed in the Iraq war and in his abilities as a warrior.

Even the license plates on his Chevy truck reflect that: AIR ASLT.

Twice he served his country in combat, first in Kosovo and then in Iraq as an elite Army Ranger.

He was a sniper, a highly trained killer, although kill was not the word the military uses. Instead, his duty was to "reduce the target" or "neutralize" it. He once told his father, "We lit them up, Dad."

But those who knew him said that behind the tough talk, Greg had a soft heart. The horror he saw all around him, whether it was American soldiers blown to pieces by roadside bombs or the lives of the enemy that he himself ended with a bullet, came back from the wars with him.

He couldn't make it go away, especially after Iraq. He couldn't sleep. He pushed away the people he loved and hopelessly turned inward. He accepted some mental health treatment but struggled to avoid showing signs of weakness.

Greg went back to his job as a Milwaukee police officer shortly after returning home from 11 months in Iraq in November. He seemed to crave the level of danger and action that he left behind in Iraq, so he applied to join the police tactical enforcement unit.

One day before the roster of officers who made the squad came out - a list he would have made - Greg typed a suicide note on his computer and left two copies in his home in the 3400 block of N. 92nd St. He apologized for not being strong enough to go on living.

The final line states: "Well just leave it as war being one hell of a bitch no matter how big or small its found."

Greg died March 6, two days before he would have turned 27. He shot himself in the head with his police gun in the basement of his home.

He won't be listed among the nearly 2,400 American soldiers who died so far in Iraq, but people he loved and even those he served with in combat consider his death a casualty of war.

What Greg's family wants now is for other soldiers who are suffering from their war experience to learn from his story and reach out for help to ease the adjustment from combat to civilian life.

"Two wars were too much," said his father, Greg Braun, a school maintenance engineer in Milwaukee. "The horror of war he went through killed him. There's no two ways about it."

'Something I don't want to be'

Even in high school, Greg showed the intensity that would shape him into a soldier and police officer.

His football coach at Dominican High School, Dave Richardson, remembers that Greg would ride on the team bus to the away games with his helmet chin-strapped to his head and his mouth guard in for the entire trip. Often players are more laid back, even napping or listening to music on their headphones.

"That was how he got prepared for what he considered at that time to be war," Richardson said.

Greg met Daniel Heger in high school, and they would remain close friends after graduation. Greg joined the Army and went off to Ranger training.

Then he was deployed to Kosovo to be part of a peacekeeping force. Don't be misled by the name. He saw intense action in the chaotic, war-torn region and learned the bitter taste of killing for his country.

Heger, now a designer at a Milwaukee construction firm, first sensed trouble after Greg returned to the U.S. in 2000 and some of his buddies took him out to a bar on Water St. to celebrate his 21st birthday.

"He pulled out his military ID and just stared at it. He said, 'They're making me into something I don't want to be,'" Heger said.

The gloom that settled on their table never lifted.

"What do you say to that? How do you change the subject?" Heger said.

Greg took a job as a security guard at Northridge Mall and later joined the Milwaukee Police Department. He requested to be assigned to busy District 5 on the north side.

Greg, who had the rank of sergeant, volunteered to go to Iraq with the 1st Battalion, 128th Infantry of the Wisconsin Army National Guard. He told people he believed America was making a positive difference in that faraway country.

But another disturbing episode happened right after Greg came home from Iraq. He and Heger were at a theater seeing "Jarhead," a movie featuring a Marine sniper and his buddies in the 1991 Gulf War.

"He would yell at the screen," Heger recalled. "I said, 'Are you OK?' And he said, 'It wouldn't happen like that.' "

That night is the first time Greg talked to Heger about his post-traumatic stress disorder. They sat in Heger's driveway. Greg's hands were shaking.

Greg's father and mother, Greg and Linda Braun, said their son did not like to talk about war.

"Don't go there," he would say.

But he did open up to _____, an _____ woman he met just before leaving for Iraq. Much of what we know about what Greg was thinking, especially his trepidation about coming home, comes from letters and videotapes that he sent her from Iraq.

The two quickly fell in love. Greg devotes many of the letters and tapes to expressing his affection for her and imagining their future together.

"In a couple of hours here, I'm going to be going out on a nice little mission," he shares with her and his family on a video. "It's been kind of preying on my mind a little bit here, as I'm sure you all can imagine and expect. Oh, Lord. But it's all for a good cause, God and country."

Greg spent two weeks of leave in May with _____ in _____. When he returned to Iraq, she said she was pregnant with his baby. She later told him she had a miscarriage. They made plans to marry this June.

Choice to return to Iraq

Last summer, Greg's appendix burst while he was in Iraq, and he was sent to Germany for treatment. While he was there, he had a reaction to his medication, which he admitted mixing with alcohol even though he wasn't much of a drinker. The combination made him disoriented, and he wound up in a psychiatric ward, his family said. Given a choice of returning to the U.S. or to Iraq, he chose Iraq. He felt guilty being away from his platoon.

He also injured his back on a mission to disarm improvised explosive devices when his Humvee was blown up. More traumatic for him were the deaths of four American soldiers in his convoy.



Police Officer Greg Braun (left) and Justin Lemke were partners at the Milwaukee Police Department before Braun left to serve in Iraq. He went back to his job shortly after he returned home in November after 11 months in the Middle East.

Photo/Courtesy Braun Family

"He literally picked up the pieces of his friends. He said, 'Dad, you wouldn't believe what lungs look like on the road,' " his father said.

Two soldiers who served alongside Greg in an area north of Baghdad said warriors are expected to put horror like that out of their minds and go on.

Mick Chemlick, who not only fought in Greg's unit but also works as an officer in the same police district, said he keeps all the terrible images from the war in what he calls the Iraq file of his mind. "I'm in Milwaukee now," he said. That's a different file.

Chemlick and Greg were both trained as snipers.

"We did a lot of overwatching, waiting for bad guys to come out and plant bombs. We worked mostly at night," he said.

Armed with rifles fitted with night-vision scopes, they hid in bushes and rocks 100 yards or more from the people who came into their sights. They would shoot anyone planting a bomb.

"It's all matter of fact," said Chad Hollenbeck, captain of Greg's platoon. Afterward, there was a bit of paperwork to fill out and then you would "go to bed just like any other night."

Chemlick said he thinks Greg never got over an incident in Kosovo in which he killed a boy who approached and was deemed in that split second to be a possible threat.

"We had long talks about it. You try to rationalize what happened," Chemlick said. "Bad things happen during war. There's always guilt involved. You get sent to do something. You've got to do your job."

Back in Milwaukee, Greg told Chemlick he had been to the VA hospital. "They think I've got unresolved issues," he told him, gesturing with his fingers to put quote marks around "unresolved issues."

"Traditionally, cops don't go see counselors. Soldiers don't see counselors," Chemlick said. It's seen as weakness.

Chemlick said he and other officers felt guilty they didn't detect Greg's suffering after he returned to the job.

"We get paid to be observant," he said.

Hollenbeck, who returned home to Elewa, Wis., to sell insurance, said, "I'm not saying we were knee-deep in grenade pins every day, but we were always at a very high state of alert. I heard that's the problem. Over there, your body produces a chemical to keep you at a heightened state of alert. And your body is not made to produce that all the time, and then you come home and you kind of crash," he said. "He may not be dead over there from a bomb, but he still died over there in a way."

'Back to peaceful Wisconsin'

Greg's unit left Iraq around Nov. 1 and went to Fort McCoy for processing of paperwork, medical checkups and briefings on many topics related to being home again.

"They had just come from the most dangerous place on earth back to peaceful Wisconsin," said Lt. Col. Tim Donovan, who works in public affairs for the National Guard here.

During his final days in Iraq, Greg was feeling mounting anxiety about returning home. In a letter he wrote:

"To shut oneself down from actions and a state of mind where you no longer do those nameless and unspeakable acts that one does for survivability. I had to do it after Kosovo, shut off those tools and instincts and countless other things, things I never thought I would have to draw on or need again, and it's one helluva process. It's certainly easier to turn it back on than off, which in a way is frightening in itself."

Two days after leaving Fort McCoy, Greg showed up at Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Milwaukee to be treated for back pain.

But he also reported difficulty sleeping, nightmares, disturbing memories, anxiety and depression. He was diagnosed with moderate to severe post-traumatic stress disorder and prescribed medication to manage the symptoms, along with pain meds for his back.

But, VA doctors said, Greg declined an important aspect of treatment - psychotherapy. What he needed was to talk out the things that bothered him.

"The plan was to keep encouraging him and exploring with him at every opportunity to have him re-evaluate that decision," said Richard Gibson, a physician and manager of mental health at Zablocki. With permission from Greg's family, Gibson and others at the VA spoke openly about Greg's treatment for this story.

"He saw things way beyond those any human being should be exposed to," Gibson said.

The first word in psychotherapy is psycho, and Greg couldn't stand the idea that he was going crazy, his parents said.

"He put on such a good show because he didn't want to let people down," Greg's mother, Linda, said.

Fiancée _____ said Greg began to say he was feeling worthless and hopeless. He feared he might harm someone else or himself, and he could not be fixed.

He cut _____ out of his life altogether within three weeks of getting home from Iraq. She and his parents, who remain in close contact, believe he was shutting down emotionally and could not face the woman to whom he had opened his heart.

But Heger and Chemlick both said Greg told them he was ending everything with _____ because he believed she was not completely truthful with him. She says she is a lawyer, but the State Bar of _____ told the Journal Sentinel there is no one practicing law with that name. She said she practices under a different name but would not elaborate.

Greg's parents said they didn't feel the VA was being aggressive enough in its treatment of Greg or pursuing him when he missed appointments.

"You can't force mental health treatment on a person unless they're considered an imminent danger to themselves or others. He was never assessed to be that way," Gibson said.

"We made many attempts to get him more involved," said Andy Hendrickson, a nurse and education specialist with the VA's outreach program for soldiers returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Greg's assignment as a sniper made it particularly important that he get help, said Hendrickson, a combat veteran himself. They get a clear view of another human just before ending that person's life. You don't have to wonder whether you hit your target. A sniper has a huge burden to bear, he said.

Hendrickson said he also knew that Greg had returned to his job as a police officer, a risky occupation for someone who is not handling stress well. He invited Greg to group sessions to help his adjustment, but Greg told him he wasn't quite ready.

"He indicated to me that things were going pretty good," Hendrickson said. "He appeared to be guarded about what he told me. I was trying to build trust with him."

Returning soldiers often think that if they don't talk about what's wrong, it will go away, said Karen Berte, a physician and specialist on post-traumatic stress disorder at Zablocki. "Unfortunately," she said, "it's really the reverse that's true."

Greg's family thinks he might have stopped taking his medicine at some point, possibly because he was concerned about how the drugs affected his work performance. Doctors at the VA said they saw no evidence of that. An autopsy found a fairly high level of pain-deadening morphine in Greg's blood.

Greg's last visit to the Zablocki center was Feb. 21, about two weeks before his death.

'Everybody needs help'

Near the end, Greg avoided seeing even close friends such as Daniel Heger, who found himself hoping that Greg would "crack" just enough to get serious inpatient treatment.

But Greg kept up a strong front. He began taking martial arts training.

"He never wanted to come across as a person who needed help from anybody. That's sad because at some point in your life, everybody needs help. It's not a bad thing," Heger said.

Even in his pain, Greg agreed in January to be the guest speaker at St. Alphonsus Church in Greendale, which had assembled care packages for him and other soldiers in Iraq. It was the church Ruth Shully attended. She is the sister of Greg's late grandmother, and he was very close to Shully.

Shully noticed that Greg seemed different after Iraq, more sullen. But on this day, he put on his full dress uniform and proudly stood in front of the congregation to thank them for their support.

People stood and applauded. Tears filled Greg's eyes.

At that moment, Shully said, he looked beautiful and graceful.



Sgt Gregory N. Braun
with his mother Linda, his sister, Katie, and father Greg

Photo/Courtesy Braun Family

Where to call for help

Suicide prevention resources include the Milwaukee crisis hotline, **(414) 257-7222**, and the national suicide crisis hotline, **(800) 784-2433**.

The Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Milwaukee offers a wide range of no-cost services and care to combat veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Call: Jean Bromley, (414) 384-2000, ext. 41826, or Helen Bolgrien, (414) 384-2000, ext. 42140. Both extensions also can be reached through this toll-free number: (888) 469-6614. These lines will be operating sun 4/30 today to coincide with publication of this article.

A free informational session for these veterans and their families is scheduled for 6 p.m. Wednesday at Zablocki's Matousek Auditorium, 5000 W. National Ave.

Police start veterans support group

April 29, 2006

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

If Greg Braun's work was slipping in his final weeks of life, it was not showing.

"He was an exemplary officer. He had attracted no negative attention in the five years he had been on the force," said Mike Massa, captain at the 5th District, where Greg was assigned.

After the shock of Greg's suicide, the Police Department is taking action to help its officers who return from combat.

About 65 Milwaukee officers have been activated for military duty since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and 15 of those are now in war zones, the department reports.

"You're expected to be the tower of strength, have all the answers, solve all the problems out there on the street. What happens if you can't?" Massa said.

Officer David Arndt, coordinator of the police officer support team, said Greg's death "opened up a lot of people's eyes within the Milwaukee Police Department. I've had concerns about vets returning for quite a while."

Painful war memories can eat them up, Arndt said, and they don't know where to turn.

Arndt said Chief Nannette Hegerty asked him to put together a support group for officers who return from combat, a safe and confidential place where they can talk through their issues. Officers would be assured that asking for help would not affect their chances for advancement.

The first meeting, led by a facilitator from Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, will be in May. A site for the weekly meetings, well away from any police station, has been found. More specific information about the support group will be sent out to all officers who serve in the military.

The suicide risk for law enforcement officers is considerably higher than for the general population. On average, for every officer killed in the line of duty in America, three kill themselves, according to the National Police Suicide Foundation in Maryland.

Adding combat stress ratchets up the danger. An Army report found that more than a third of American soldiers returning from Iraq are receiving psychological counseling, and about one in six are found to have problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Last year, 83 U.S. Army soldiers committed suicide, up from 67 in 2004 and 60 in 2003. Those numbers include active-duty soldiers and deployed Reserve and Guard troops.

Editorial: Helping those who serve

May 25, 2006

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Not every soldier who is killed in the Iraq war dies on a battlefield or in a hospital bed. Last month, Journal Sentinel columnist Jim Stingl told the story of one Milwaukee soldier - Greg Braun - who served tours in Kosovo and Iraq and came home with the two battles still inside him. Unable to cope with the stress of what he had lived through, Braun fired a bullet into his head in the basement of his home on N. 92nd St., two days before his 27th birthday.

Braun's plight was extreme but not unique. The Hartford Courant in Connecticut recently has reported on other Iraq war veterans who, stressed beyond endurance by the wretched experience of war, have killed themselves and on how neglect on the part of the U.S. military bureaucracy may have contributed to some of the suicides.

The Courant disclosed that, pressed by troop shortages caused in part by declining enlistments, the Pentagon has increasingly sent, kept and recycled troubled GIs into combat in Iraq. Braun was one such GI. Last summer, after his appendix burst while he was in Iraq - his second war - Braun was sent to a hospital in Germany, where a combination of alcohol and medicine produced a reaction that landed him in a psychiatric ward. Yet Braun went back to Iraq.

This is only one indication of a failure to adequately track the mental health of soldiers. The Courant found that the Defense Department is failing to meaningfully enforce a 1997 law requiring the military to assess the mental health of all deploying troops. The assessment consists of a single mental health question on a pre-deployment form that is filled out by soldiers. Even GIs who report mental problems are rarely referred for counseling, the Courant revealed.

This neglect appears to reflect a mind-set, both in the military and in civilian life, that does not take mental health seriously. Stingl told how Braun didn't seek counseling for his problems at the Department of Veterans Affairs, believing it would be seen as a sign of weakness. Others avoid seeking treatment for stress because they think it will go away. Yet the stress that eventually killed Braun proved to be every bit as deadly as a bomb.

Because they are so potentially lethal, stress, depression and other forms of mental illness suffered by our men and women in uniform need to be regarded by our military leaders as a serious medical threat. Those who are coping with these problems, whether they are in uniform or in civilian life, need to understand that their afflictions are no more shameful than a physical injury or illness. They ought to seek the treatment they need. And society needs to make that treatment available to them.



**The uniform of Sgt. Gregory N. Braun,
75th Ranger Regiment, U.S. Army Special Operations
Command, was presented to Coalition Memorial for addition
to his Archive, by his parents, Linda and Greg Braun, on
Memorial Day, May 28, 2007**



**The uniform of Sgt. Gregory N. Braun,
75th Ranger Regiment, U.S. Army Special Operations
Command, displayed on Memorial Day, May 28, 2007, next to
the Coalition Memorial Wall that bears his entry**



Traveling Coalition Memorial displays the uniform of Sgt. Gregory N. Braun in Sycamore, Illinois September 13-16, 2007 beside The Wall That Heals, The Traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial



Traveling Coalition Memorial displays the uniform of Sgt. Gregory N. Braun in Sycamore, Illinois September 13-16, 2007 beside The Wall That Heals, The Traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial



The Wall That Heals

The Traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Sycamore, Illinois September 13-16, 2007