

# Family collects tributes to fallen soldier as 'sacred relics'

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**By Wayne Woolley**

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OUTH AMBOY, N.J. (RNS)—It happens every time a U.S. soldier or Marine dies in Iraq. The bad news immediately spreads across the base like wildfire, and in the troop recreation centers, Internet connections are shut down.

Commanders don't want word of the death to reach the soldier's family before military officials personally deliver the news. Once the knock at the family door comes between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., the electronic blockade back in Iraq is lifted and a torrent of e-mails flows from the battlefield to the dead soldier's family in America.

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Sgt. 1st Class  
Benjamin  
Sebban, 29,  
died in Iraq  
this spring.  
Sebban's  
family  
received a  
flood of  
supportive e-  
mails and  
letters from  
soldiers who  
served with  
him in Iraq.  
(RNS/courtesy  
82nd Airborne  
Public Affairs  
Office.)

The practice of military commanders sending personal letters to the families of fallen troops dates at least to the Civil War. But in an era when deployed soldiers can maintain MySpace pages, families have immediate access to a digital community of former comrades offering condolences, stories and even glimpses into a loved one's final hours.

This is exactly what happened after Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Sebban, a senior combat medic in the 82nd Airborne Division who grew up in South Amboy, N.J., was killed by an explosion while tending to wounded paratroopers in Iraq.

Sebban, 29, died March 17 in Baquba. By 6 p.m. in New Jersey, the phone

rang in the casualty assistance office at Fort Monmouth.

Three hours later, a chaplain and two officers arrived at Sebban's mother's home in Neshanic Station. Then, almost immediately after the visit, came a tide of personal e-mails offering condolences and testimonials to Sebban's life.

Among the first was one from Sgt. John Gilbert, a fellow medic. "He risked his life to make sure others were not harmed," Gilbert wrote. "That's the type of person he was."

The missives sent from the field to Sebban's family paint a portrait of a young man who could be funny, generous and uncompromising in performing his duties—all at the same time. The e-mails describe a practical joker, a confidant who lent \$600 to a fellow soldier who really needed it, and someone who was at work saving lives the day he died.

Messages from the combat zone become a central part of the shrine many families eventually erect in their home, said Joanne Steen, a grief counselor and author who advises the Pentagon on how to help military families cope with loss.

"People have a tendency of collecting and saving those things that belong to the deceased; they're sacred relics," said Steen, who lost her husband, a naval aviator, in a training accident. "You can never get enough information about your loved one. Each time they hear a story or get an e-mail, that's another piece of the puzzle they didn't have."

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Besides his mother, Barbara Walsh, a nurse who was working as a missionary in Africa when he was born, Sebban is survived by two younger brothers, Daniel, 28, and David, 27. Both are Army veterans.

Daniel Sebban said the family decided to share the e-mails about his brother soon after they began arriving from Iraq and then from other military outposts around the globe. Messages also arrived from sources as varied as the owner of a pizza parlor in South Amboy, former classmates at a Bible college in New York and a Navy physician who urged Benjamin Sebban to consider a career in medicine.

"These e-mails say more about who my brother really was than I can," Daniel Sebban said.

The e-mails written by the men and women who served with Sebban return to many of the same themes—his skills as a medic, his generosity, his sense of humor and his love for the Army. Many make references to Sebban's deep Christian faith.

Walsh recalled how her son begged her to let him transfer from a parochial high school to a vocational school for a new health technology program. She knew there was a future for her son in medicine, but something was pulling him toward the military. He almost joined the Navy after high school. His mother steered him on another path.

"Benjamin, just give God one year of your life," she said. He went to a school in upstate New York that prepares young Christians for missionary life. He liked it enough that he finished a second year, then moved to Chattanooga, Tenn., to finish a degree at a Bible college.

His younger brother had joined the Army and was stationed at Fort Campbell, Ky. The brothers talked about military life, and Barbara Walsh soon got a phone call from her oldest son.

“Mom, I just met an Army recruiter, and they’ve got one slot open for a medic,” Benjamin told her.

Walsh’s youngest son, David, soon followed his brothers into the Army. Even after his brothers left the military, Benjamin Sebban stayed in, rising quickly through the enlisted ranks.

Walsh had protested the Vietnam War and never imagined any of her sons would join the military. “They could be pastors, they could be missionaries,” she remembered thinking when they were young. But she learned to accept their decisions, especially Benjamin’s.

The last time Walsh heard from Sebban, he had good news. He had been promoted from staff sergeant to sergeant first class. That meant he was within two ranks of the highest enlisted position, sergeant major. He talked of making a career of the Army.

“Two days later,” she said, “he was dead.”

In one of the dozens of e-mails that have come from Iraq, Staff Sgt. Brian Merry wrote that Sebban had talked often about a visit he made to Arlington National Cemetery before shipping out. He had insisted Merry do the same.

Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin L. Sebban was buried at Arlington. Meanwhile, the e-mails from Iraq keep coming.

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