



## MILITARY

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# Mother of One Dead Soldier Suspects Sex Assault

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*At least 20 female soldiers have died in Iraq and Afghanistan in "noncombat" circumstances that their families find mysterious. The mother of one talks here about why she thinks sexual violence--not suicide--was her daughter's real killer.*

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (WOMENSENEWS)--When Diana Morgan saw her daughter's body for the first time after her death in Iraq in February of 2008, she thought U.S. Army Spc. Keisha Marie Morgan looked angry in her coffin.

"She looked like she was not at peace. She didn't look like the child I had known," said Morgan, who lives in Washington, D.C.

At the time, Keisha's death in Baghdad was a mystery and designated "non-combat related."



Credit: Eileen Horan

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Nearly six months later Army investigators ruled it a suicide brought on by an overdose of her military-dispensed prescription antidepressants.

The military has consistently said all non-combat related deaths undergo a very complete and thorough investigation. Indeed, some reports stretch for 800 pages, which include graphic photos.

Morgan wasn't aware the military had diagnosed Keisha as having depression, let alone taking medication for it. "She was outgoing and very happy," she says, "I can't see her not telling me."

But Keisha had confided in her mother about a night when she was certain a fellow soldier had slipped something in her drink at a local bar. When she awoke the following morning--failing to remember how she left the bar and returned to barracks--the soldier was in her room. This same man was on base at the time of Keisha's death, says her mother, recalling her daughter's concern about this.

A week later, a roommate found Keisha lying on the floor and couldn't tell if she was sleeping. Keisha erupted in seizures and the roommate ran for help. Medics could not stabilize her and she passed away.

Keisha and her roommate were "neat nuts; they were so neat it was ridiculous," says her mother.

## A Room Torn to Hell

Yet pictures of the scene sent to Morgan revealed "the room was torn to hell; someone struggled in that room. I truly believe someone did something to her." She believes her daughter may have been raped and

murdered.

Morgan has not shared any of this information with the Army's Criminal Investigative Command, which investigated Keisha's death. She said investigators treated her in a cold, disrespectful way and discouraged her from trying to find out all she could about her daughter's death.

"They turned their back on me," she says. "I believe they know the truth, and they don't want to tell me, and I'm not the last one."

Morgan bitterly recalls how casualty assistance officers callously told her they were removing Keisha's heart and brain. "They just told us they were doing it. The military owns you even when you're dead. That's Army protocol."

Other families are struggling with the aftermath of daughters who died in "non-combat related death" in Afghanistan or Iraq that are still shadowed in mystery.

More than 130 women have died in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Defense Department has deemed nearly 50 non-combat related, Retired Army Col. Ann Wright, who quit the State Department in 2003 in protest of the Iraq invasion, told Women's eNews.

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## 20 Deaths 'Very Suspicious'

Wright said at least 20 of the non-combat deaths are "very suspicious" and the families are speaking out to some degree.

All are seeking clear answers, but especially the family of U.S. Army Private Lavena Johnson, the subject of intense media scrutiny.

Johnson has become the face of U.S. military women whose families suspect their non-combat related deaths, officially ruled suicides, were actually caused by rape and murder.

The deaths coincide with an increase in reported sexual violence against military women.

From October of 2007 to September of 2008, 2,900 sexual assaults were reported, up 9 percent across the armed forces and up 26 percent in war zones from the previous 12 months, the Department of Defense said in an annual report on sexual violence.

The report indicated 2,947 sexual assaults were reported in 2006, up nearly 75 percent from 2004, partially because that's when new reporting procedures for rape were being implemented.

Chris Grey, chief of public affairs for the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, said his heart goes out to the families of Keisha Morgan and Lavena Johnson, but there is no argument about these suicides. "Some families have a very difficult time believing a loved-one would do this," he says.

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*Originally from Buffalo, N.Y., John Lasker is a freelance journalist from Columbus, Ohio, whose work has appeared in Wired, Christian Science Monitor, Truthout and the Buffalo News.*

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