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A closer look | Pvt. Keiffer P. Wilhelm

Father of soldier who committed suicide is on a quest for answers

A war within

By Ramon Bracamontes and Chris Roberts / El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- Adrian Wilhelm, the father of a 19-year-old Fort Bliss private who killed himself four weeks ago in Iraq, is fueled by anger.

He's angry at the army. He's angry at Fort Bliss and at the 1st Armored Cavalry.

Most of all, he is enraged at the four soldiers who are charged with abusing his son, Pvt. Keiffer P. Wilhelm, through excessive physical training. It is this abuse, Adrian Wilhelm said, that probably caused his son to kill himself Aug. 4.

A Navy veteran, the elder Wilhelm said he wants to make sure nothing like this ever happens again to a U.S. soldier.

Adrian Wilhelm is publicly talking about his son, but the Army is not. And Adrian Wilhelm is trying to piece together exactly what happened in Iraq, as his son had only been there four days.

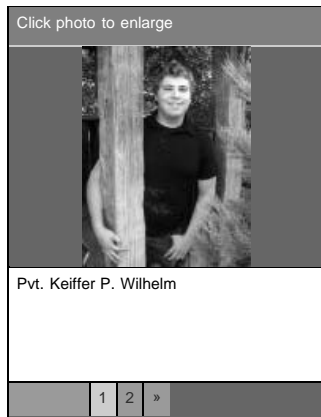
"The Army has sealed everything and stopped all communication," Wilhelm, 40, said from his home in Plymouth, Ohio. "I just can't understand what happened. I can't comprehend that these guys in a unit, as friends, go over there and beat on their own. I am fueled by anger and I'm not going to let this go."

Pvt. Wilhelm joined the Army in December and was assigned to a unit at Fort Bliss. He killed himself in southern Iraq, his father said. The army's official statement said he died of injuries from "a noncombat-related incident."

Two weeks after his death, on Aug. 20, four other Fort Bliss soldiers were charged with cruelty and maltreatment of subordinates. One of the subordinates was Keiffer Wilhelm.

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Army says there is no direct evidence that the soldiers' alleged misconduct caused Wilhelm's death.

The four soldiers remain overseas and are awaiting a military hearing, which will be in Iraq. They were not arrested or detained, but were put on "present for duty" status and moved to a different base. They have been assigned military legal counsel.

Maj. Myles B. Caggins, public affairs officer for the 4th Brigade, 1st Armored

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Division, said no date for a hearing has been set because the investigation continues.

Wilhem and the four accused of abusing him were with the 2nd Battalion, 13th Cavalry Regiment. Approximately 200 soldiers were in the

unit.

Adrian Wilhelm is trying to figure out why his son was targeted.

"I just don't understand how my son could be so happy one day and ready to deploy with his friends to Iraq to train Iraqi soldiers, and then this happens. It is still surprising."

Keiffer Wilhelm possessed a strong personality, his father said. Keiffer, a wrestler in high school, had survived boot camp and had lost weight.

"If he had any quirks it is that he was a nice guy and he would not stop making you laugh," Adrian Wilhelm said. "Somehow, no matter what, there was always another joke ready to come from him."

The last time Adrian Wilhelm saw Keiffer alive was on May 7 during a family wedding in Arizona. Keiffer seemed happy, excited to be deploying. He was talking about buying a car in El Paso and an iPhone, his father said.

"There's no way he could do what he did without being pushed to the limit," Adrian Wilhelm said. "There has to be a way to stop this from ever happening again."

According to the Army, suicides among soldiers are on the rise and have surpassed the suicide rates for civilians, when compared on a per capita basis. The Army confirmed 128 suicides last year and an additional 15 suspected suicides among active-duty soldiers and the National Guard.

The rate of suicides is 20.2 per 100,000 in the Army. The suicide rate for civilians is 11 per 100,000 people.

In 2008, Fort Bliss had six confirmed suicides.

One of them was Spc. Manny Zavala, 26, who hanged himself Dec. 3 at his El Paso apartment.

"He spoke in a letter he left that he had this pain and he didn't know how to take care of it and he was sorry for what he was going to do," said the soldier's mother, Rosario Zavala. Her son was a Fort Bliss combat medic who had never deployed.

Manny Zavala had talked to the Fort Bliss medical staff about his problems.

"Three months prior, he had gone to get help and they gave him tranquilizers," his mother said.

She could see his pain.

"I would say, 'Hijo, let's get some help.' But he would say 'No mom, I'm all right.'"

She thought things would be all right because her son had received a new assignment at Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona and was planning to live with his parents at home in Yuma.

"We fixed his room up," she said, her voice thickening with emotion. "But when he came home we had to bury him."

Army officials will only say that suicides are a problem they are trying to lessen. At Fort Campbell, Ky., all regular activity at the end of May was suspended to focus on suicide-prevention training. Fort Campbell, with 11 confirmed suicides, led the Army at that point. From January to March, the installation averaged a suicide per week.

Fort Bliss has had one confirmed suicide in 2009, officials said. Keiffer Wilhelm would be the second.

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