

Published Tuesday | April 24, 2007

Hastings, Neb., native killed in Iraq

BY TIM ELFRINK
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Earlier this month, while home on leave from Iraq, Kevin Gaspers burst through the door of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's military science department, joking with his former instructors and classmates just as he had done during four years on campus.



Lt. Kevin Gaspers

On Tuesday, those same teachers and cadets struggled to accept that Gaspers had been killed in Iraq.

"You should see the mood around here right now. It's pretty quiet," said Kristine Hart, the department's human resources technician.

"He was such a well-respected, well-liked leader here," she said. "It's really hit home on the cadets from all the different classes."

Gaspers, 26, a lieutenant in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division based at Fort Bragg, N.C., died when a suicide bomber attacked his base, and the roof of a building collapsed, said his mother, Pam Gaspers.

Details provided to his family suggest that Gaspers was among nine 82nd Airborne soldiers who were killed when a truck bomb exploded next to their base in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad.

The Army has declined to officially release the soldiers' names pending notification of relatives.

In Lincoln and his hometown of Hastings, Neb., friends and family members remembered Gaspers as a patriotic "good ol' country boy" with a great sense of humor and a real love for serving his country.

"I'll just remember his smile, because he always smiled. He wasn't a doom-and-gloom kind of guy," said Marie Butler, principal at St. Cecilia High School in Hastings, from which Gaspers graduated in 2000.

The high school remembered Gaspers, who wrestled and played football at St. Cecilia, during a school-wide Mass on Tuesday morning, Butler said.

"After today's Mass, a freshman boy came up to me and said he'd heard a lot about Kevin and really thought he was a good man," Butler said. "I think that's a great description of him, just a really good man, a good man."

After graduation, Gaspers joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps program at UNL, where he excelled as a leader, school officials said.

In his senior year, he was selected from the 75 students in the ROTC program to lead the cadets' battalion, said retired Lt. Col. Bede Bolin, a professor of military science when Gaspers was a student.

"He wasn't a yeller or a screamer type of leader. He was low-key and very professional in how he handled himself and how he lead his classmates," Bolin recalled. "That drew a lot of respect from other cadets and from the faculty here."

Gaspers earned his Army officer's commission in 2005, after graduating from UNL with a degree in accounting, Bolin said.

With the 82nd Airborne, Gaspers trained to be a paratrooper, his mother said. "He really loved to jump."

Gaspers is survived by his parents, John and Pam of Hastings; and two sisters, Katie, 23, of Omaha and Audrey, 15, of Hastings.

Funeral arrangements were pending.

Monday's attack also wounded 20 soldiers and caused the highest number of casualties for the 82nd Airborne since the Iraq war began, said Maj. Tom Earnhardt, spokesman for the division at Fort Bragg.

The wounded soldiers were members of the 5th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, Earnhardt said.

A civilian interpreter also was injured the explosion.

"They were inside the building," Earnhardt said. "Fifteen of the wounded were superficial, and they were treated on the

AP Video

[An al-Qaida-linked group claims responsibility](#)

spot and returned to duty. Five were evacuated to a military hospital, but none of the five have life-threatening injuries."

An insurgent group that includes al-Qaida in Iraq claimed responsibility. It was the single deadliest attack on ground forces since Dec. 1, 2005, when a roadside bomb killed 10 Marines and wounded 11 on foot patrol near Fallujah.

Also Monday, another U.S. soldier was killed in a roadside bombing in Diyala, the military said, bringing the day's American death toll to 10.

The Associated Press reported that residents of the Ameen area south of Baqouba described what they believed was the attack that killed the nine soldiers, although the U.S. military did not confirm their accounts.

The residents said gunmen first fired on American snipers at a U.S. base housed in an old Iraqi primary school, and then a suicide car bomber rammed a checkpoint at the school's entrance.

The first explosion left a path for a second suicide vehicle, a truck, to approach the building, the witnesses said.

Contact the Omaha World-Herald [newsroom](#)

Copyright ©2007 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.