

## A death shrouded by war, mystery

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### Soldier's family and friends want answers from Army

By Sally Jacobs, Globe Staff | November 18, 2007

One morning this past June, Ciara Durkin sat at her computer at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and wrote a chilling e-mail to a friend in Massachusetts.

"Ok. so today a crazy soldier pulled a 9mm on me . . . don't go telling people. . . he's in jail and i'm doing better. TTYL," she wrote.

Weeks later, Durkin, an Army specialist who worked in finance, dispatched another in a series of e-mails to family and friends. The tone of this message, sent on the Fourth of July, was utterly different. She was exultant.

"Well, as the first of the gang of us to officially hit the 4th of July (12:10 am here, lol) Happy 4th," Durkin wrote. "I am more than happy to be here making sure you have this day to celebrate. Regardless of politics, this is worth it to me."

She signed off with a mention of her upcoming leave. "I'll be home in 2 months, no complaints here."

Durkin, 30, came home as planned, but would never make it back for good. On Sept. 28th, her body was found on the base with a single bullet in her head, her M-16 nearby. The Army has declared her death a noncombat related incident, but has provided no more public information about how the ebullient flame-haired soldier died.

There are only two ways that Durkin could have died: She either shot herself or was shot by someone else on the base. Her first e-mail suggests she had something to fear. And friends and family have said that she was a passionate young woman who had many plans for her life after the service. They insist she would never have killed herself, and are increasingly anxious for the Army to offer some definitive answers. Soon.

Durkin's family declined to be interviewed, saying they are waiting for the military's explanation. Army officials also declined to answer any questions and have prohibited soldiers on the base from talking with the media. In that silence, questions about Durkin's unexplained death have multiplied.

First, there was the soldier who pointed a gun to her head, an encounter that she reported to several people. Then there were her unsettling comments while on a home leave in early September, just two weeks before her death. Durkin told several people that she had uncovered some things that had made her some "enemies," although she did not say exactly what. Durkin, an information technology specialist whose unit worked with finance and commercial contractors, said that if something happened to her, "We should come and investigate," said Dawn Hurley, a close friend of Durkin's.

"I didn't know what she meant," sighed Hurley. "Maybe I didn't want to know."

Durkin, nonetheless, seemed to thrive overseas. E-mails that she sent to a group of more than two dozen friends and relatives reflect a soldier who was as enthusiastic about her military experience as she was proud of it. Durkin had struggled with depression a few years earlier and had sought treatment, according to one person who knew her. But friends say that those dark days were long gone. Her boisterous e-mails have further convinced them that Durkin, an ardent Red Sox fan who comes from a sprawling Irish clan, would never have taken her own life.

Durkin also had extensive plans for after her return, expected to be in February. She hoped for a job with a Boston bank, and was taking computer courses to enhance her resume. "Boy, I can't wait. I'm so excited," Durkin wrote. "It feels good to talk about my plans after this deployment because that means I'm not too far from it." Durkin, a lesbian, also had plans to get married.

Those close to her do not believe that Durkin was targeted because of her sexual orientation. Durkin had talked with her friends, before she enlisted, about the Army's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which allows gays and lesbians to serve as long as they do not disclose their sexual orientation or act upon it. She was, they recall, not particularly concerned about being found out. Durkin apparently did not reveal that she was a lesbian while in the service and, according to one soldier who knew her, her unit members were as shocked by her death as the discovery that she was a lesbian.

"It just doesn't add up," said Douglas Bailey, a spokesman who is representing the family at the request of Senator John F. Kerry. "Ciara was very happy when she was home. She loved being in the military; it was really the right place for her. The family absolutely does not believe it is suicide."

The military has said that its autopsy should be done by the end of this month, but that its investigation into how Durkin died could take many months, even years. An independent autopsy, paid for by Kerry, is also expected to be presented to the family soon.

What will those reports say about the bullet that killed her? The Durkin family has been told it was fired directly into her mouth, according to Bailey.

"All the evidence may add up to a suicide, or somebody who staged a suicide," added Bailey. "The evidence would look the same either way."

A desire to enlist

Ciara Durkin was not the kind of woman some might expect to enlist in the military. She liked to eat tofu scrambles and grow organic vegetables on the roof of her Jamaica Plain apartment. She was a lover of animals and spent some of her spare time rescuing wild cats and playing with her pet rabbit, Ms. Wilbur. She worked with Alzheimer's patients and the needy. A member of the vestry of her church, she sometimes handed out small stickers that said, "God Bless You."

Ciara Durkin was also precisely the kind of woman some might expect to enlist in the military. A stocky figure with a barrel chest, she was strong and proud of it. Her daily uniform included cargo pants, a T-shirt, and a Red Sox cap into which she vainly tried to cram her red curls. She smoked Marlboro cigarettes and sometimes had lunch with female veterans at the VFW post. She was a defender of creatures large and small.

"Ciara was the savior of marginalized populations," said Jennifer Jensen, Durkin's former partner of seven years. "Bunnies, gay men, the elderly. She really believed in fairness for everybody. She was their protector."

And so it was that when Durkin enlisted in the National Guard in fall 2005, no one was much surprised. She had been talking about it for years.

"The surprising thing was that she finally did it," said Jensen. "But Ciara was very adventurous. Anything worked for her. Anything. She was always the one who jumped off the boat first."

Adventure was part of it. But there were other reasons, too. Durkin wanted to use her military benefits to get a college education. She had a keen mathematical mind and years of information technology experience. She hoped to start a business on her return home, according to several friends.

Durkin was also deeply patriotic. Born in Ireland, the eighth of nine children, Durkin came to America at age 9. Her father died months after the family settled in Dorchester, leaving her mother to raise the clan. As she grew older, Durkin celebrated the liberties of being an American and exercised her right to vote with pride.

"She voted in every election she could," said Jensen. "It was very important to her."

If losing a parent and learning the customs of a new country were difficult for a young girl with a brogue, Durkin did not show it. With her broad face of freckles and goofy sense of humor - she kept a photo in her wallet of herself dressed for her prom. Proof, she would laugh, that she could look like a girl - Durkin made friends fast in the Tedeschi's parking lot in Lower Mills and the Dorchester playgrounds where she played stick ball.

And yet, somehow, she was different. Part of it was her boyish clothes. Durkin, as her friend Kellyanne Mahoney, now a teacher at Boston Latin Academy, recalls, "always wore a backward scally cap, shorts, and skateboard sneakers. At first I thought she was a little odd, the way she always hung out with the boys. But I don't think there was anyone who knew her who didn't like her."

Her boyish ways blended with a rescuer's zeal, even then. When her friends were in trouble, it was often Durkin who calmed them down. When a young man fell down a steep hillside in Dorchester one afternoon, it was Durkin who carried him back up. And when as a young teenager, Jessica Pabon, a friend of Durkin's, found herself pressed up against St. Gregory's Catholic Church in Dorchester by a group of bullies, it was Durkin who swept onto the scene and got rid of them.

"She was bigger than they were so I think just her coming to my defense stopped it," Pabon, who lives in Texas, wrote in an e-mail. "Ciara was . . . available for anyone who might need to lean on her strength."

Although a member of the Fontbonne Academy class of 1994, Durkin was unable to graduate with her class at the

Catholic girls school in Milton because she did not have enough credits. After two additional years of work with tutors she received her diploma in 1996, according to Fontbonne president Anne Malone.

Durkin worked for a couple of years as a program assistant caring for Alzheimer's patients at the Rogerson House in Jamaica Plain, formerly called the Boston Alzheimer's Center. But her thoughts soon turned to the military.

A lover of the water, Durkin considered joining either the Navy or the Coast Guard, according to several of her friends, and may have started to enlist. But in 1999, Durkin encountered a seeming roadblock. On a September morning in Dorchester, she was arrested and charged with possession of marijuana, according to Dorchester District Court records. The charge was dismissed, but the incident apparently caused her to back off her plan to join the military, at least for a while, according to one of her friends.

"Ciara said that that was why she did not go into the military the first time," said Jane Greenspan, a friend whom Durkin met at her church, St. Luke's and St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Allston. "The charge happened in between the time she enlisted and then did not go. She was very matter of fact about it. She did not screen a lot of details about her life."

Greenspan, a clinical psychologist and neighbor, knew Durkin well for a time. Between 2000 and 2005, Durkin worked in information technology and data management at Fenway Community Health, a health center in Boston that specializes in services for gay men and lesbians. But she also did some jobs on the side, and one of them was providing insurance billing services for Greenspan's practice.

She had briefly tried medication to deal with depression, according to Greenspan, but she found it made her manic and soon discontinued it.

"Ciara was not so much worried about her mental health, as she was puzzled about it," said Greenspan, recalling their conversations. "She was really trying to figure out who she was and why she was that way."

Another of Durkin's friends, who asked not to be identified, said that Durkin's depression stemmed from difficulties in her relationship with Jensen and lasted only a few months.

Indeed, by 2005, Durkin seemed to have pulled herself out of her slump. She had met a new woman, Haidee Loreto. Having left Fenway Health that spring, Durkin decided to revisit her dream of joining the military. In October, Durkin enlisted in the US Army National Guard and was eventually assigned to the 726th Finance Battalion in West Newton. After training she was deployed with the 13-member Task Force Diamond. This February, she went to Afghanistan. She expected her tour to last one year.

A trip near the front lines

Durkin took to the Army well. In an April e-mail, she wrote that she liked her fellow soldiers, and that the temperature never got below 70 degrees.

"I'm in a good mood, for the most part," Durkin wrote. "Kinda reaching my groove state now. Watching a repeat of yesterday's Red Sox game. I don't know how it ended so no one tell me."

By May, the daily temperature had risen to the 90s. Durkin and the other soldiers were required to drink eight bottles of water and two rehydration bottles a day. Durkin wrote that she had received an Army Achievement Medal for working two jobs, one handling staffing reports, the other managing the computer system. She said her workload had eased of late.

Safety was on her mind.

"My fellow troops are well, we are close and getting closer," Durkin wrote. "I have the best boss in the world, SSG Sullivan. We are the best of friends and he watches out for me at every turn. Regarding the battlefield itself, we're kicking butt. I am doing what I can to stay safe. 'Stay Alert, Stay Alive,' is my motto."

In early July, Durkin headed out on a monthlong tour of eastern Afghanistan. Her job was to set up computers and train soldiers on the Army's Eagle Cash system, a finance system for military members overseas that uses stored-value cards. The tour would take her from Kabul to Jalalabad to Sharana, some of which she videotaped. She flew in a Black Hawk helicopter: "Now, that's the way to fly," she wrote.

Durkin was clearly excited to get close to the front lines, and felt her work was meaningful.

"Educating troops about money is a great feeling because they feel supported," Durkin wrote. "The last thing a guy needs to worry about after fighting is if his finances are OK."

In her group e-mails, Durkin was chatty and sometimes jocular. She rarely mentioned politics or the larger backdrop

of the war. Nor did she ever make reference to the "enemies" she would later describe to friends and family. Friends say that she wrote more intimately in her individual e-mails, but they were of a similar positive tone.

There were two things, however, of some concern. Jensen noted that Durkin's e-mails became far fewer as time passed, as though she were preoccupied. Durkin also e-mailed her friend Dawn Hurley about the soldier who put his gun to her head, saying she had had a "close encounter," but did not elaborate. Back home on leave, she told Hurley that, "he was someone having a bad reaction, but she felt completely safe after that," said Hurley. "She said she was OK."

Durkin also told her family about some worrisome things she had seen in Afghanistan, and about enemies she might have made.

At the time, no one took her comments all together seriously. "They certainly believed that she saw something she didn't like, but when she said they might need to investigate, it seemed it might be a flip remark," said Bailey.

In any case, Ciara was home and the celebration was big. There were several parties. At one barbecue, Durkin had a tattoo of a soldier done on her shoulder and back. She went to a few Red Sox games, and visited her siblings and mother in Quincy. She spent time with her partner, Loreto, to whom she was engaged.

And on Sept. 11th, she spent the day training at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston, which helps manage the military's Eagle Cash system. Durkin was excited about the visit and hoped that she could get a job there when she returned home for good.

And that was a day she was very much looking forward to.

"I'm always a soldier, that's in my blood," Durkin wrote in one of her last e-mails. "But I will enjoy a reprise from the whole war thing."

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