

# Family questions death of Marine

By Stella Davis *06/09/08*  
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CARLSBAD — Gail Smith remembers her grandson, Chad Oligschlaeger, as a fun-loving jokester with a cheeky smile and strong will who would push himself and others to the limit.

Today, the memories and framed photos of him that grace the living room in her Carlsbad home are all that she has left.

On May 20, Marine Cpl. Oligschlaeger, 21, was found dead in his barracks room at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in California.

Oligschlaeger was a mortar man assigned to the 1st Marine Division, and had recently returned from his second tour of duty in Iraq.

While the death was initially viewed as a suicide, Oligschlaeger's family and friends are not ready to concede that he willingly ended his life. The family will wait for the autopsy report from the Marine Corps, Smith said.

"He suffered from post traumatic stress disorder, and he was struggling with it. He was on eight different medications. From what we have learned, there was not much medical supervision on how he was to take the medications," Smith said.

"His Marine friends have said that, knowing Chad and having fought by his side, they don't believe he was capable of committing suicide. Our family feels the same way."

Smith, whose daughter, Julie, was raised in Carlsbad and graduated from Carlsbad High School, said her grandson graduated from McNeil High School in Austin, Texas, and immediately joined the Marines.

"He was 17 years old when he became a Marine. He was very excited about joining. He told me that he felt it was the right thing to do. He wanted to be able to go to college. He said that after he got out of the



Gail Smith, left, grandmother of Marine Cpl. Chad Oligschlaeger, and Irma Phillips, a long-time family friend who knew the young Marine since he was born, look at a photograph taken of him in full-dress uniform when he became a Marine in 2004.

Marines, he would have the money under the GI Bill."

Oligschlaeger officially became a Marine on July 18, 2004. He graduated from boot camp in October of that year and then headed to the School of Infantry at Camp Pendleton, Calif. On completion of the school, he was designated as a mortar man and was assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st MARDIV based at Twentynine Palms.

In 2005, within just a few short months of his enlistment, he found himself deployed to Ar Ramadi in Iraq.

"When he came home, he said he did not want to go back," Smith said, recalling a conversation with him. "Last year, he learned that he was being sent back. He expressed again that he didn't want to go back. He was told that he would follow orders or the alternative would be a dishonorable discharge. So he went back to Iraq."

She said when he returned, he struggled to come to terms with what he



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Marine Cpl. Chad Oligschlaeger and his mother, Julie, in a photograph taken in February 2007 after his return from a second tour of duty in Iraq.

had seen and done in Iraq and sought help from the military.

"At the age of 18, he had seen more horrors than I

have ever seen in my life," Smith said. "I don't know if I could hold someone in my

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arms that was badly wounded and watch him die, or see dead bodies all around. He really struggled with that after his first tour in Iraq."

She said Oligschlaeger's second tour added to his stress.

But with his enlistment up just before he died, "he was getting ready, to get out, marry his fiancée and go to school to become a firefighter and a paramedic."

Since her grandson's death, Smith said she has learned more about PTSD and how little help there is available to service men and women, and their families who are dealing with it.

"I always thought that anyone in the military who has fought in a war is well taken care of if wounded physically or suffering with PTSD," she

said. "But that's not the case, I have learned.

"They give PTSD patients a bunch of pills. Where's the counseling they need? Where's the compassion for those who come home hurt after fighting for our freedoms? It's not right."

Carlsbad resident Irma Phillips is a long-time family friend. She said that she and Julie Oligschlaeger, the Marine's mother who lives in Phoenix, are now establishing a foundation to help service men and women suffering from PTSD.

"We currently have an attorney in Houston drawing up the papers to help us incorporate as a nonprofit foundation," Phillips said. "The primary focus of the foundation will be to educate people about PTSD and give sufferers and their families the resources where to get help.

"For instance, we are com-

pling a directory of doctors around the country who specialize in treating PTSD. This disorder impacts families, not just the sufferer. It's treatable. But sometimes it takes years of counseling, not just a few sessions with a doctor and then be sent on your way."

Phillips, who will serve as the foundation's secretary-treasurer, said although Oligschlaeger was not blood kin, he was part of her extended family and his death has hit her hard.

"I knew him since the day he was born," she said. "He grew up to be a very outgoing and happy young man. I think he would be proud of what his mom and I are going to do through the foundation."

Phillips said that, like Smith, she believed soldiers coming home from Iraq with PTSD were receiving the help they needed. But she has learned since Oligschlaeger's

death that there are hundreds of soldiers who are not receiving the medical help they need.

"It upsets me to find out that in Chad's case, and probably in many more cases, the military gives these kids suffering from PTSD all this medication and does not monitor them. It's disgraceful," she said.

Phillips said getting the foundation started in Oligschlaeger's memory has not been an easy task and its funding will largely depend on private donations.

"We are determined to make this a success. My son is designing a Web site for us where people will be able to go to read about Chad, the programs we plan to put together and how to donate to the foundation," she said.

She added that a domain name has been approved and the Web site should be up within weeks.