



Soldier's mom: Army has 'screwed up' giving me info on son's death

Parsippany soldier, 23, who lost his legs in Afghanistan found dead in bed

U.S. Army Sergeant Derek McConnell, 23, of Parsippany, lost his legs in Afghanistan in 2011. He was found dead in his bed in March, and his mother said the Army has "screwed up" keeping her informed while it investigates his death. *(The McConnell family)*

Brendan Kutry | NJ.com By **Brendan Kutry | NJ.com**

Email the author | Follow on Twitter

on June 19, 2013 at 1:19 PM, updated June 19, 2013 at 4:27 PM

PARSIPPANY — Months after a 23-year-old soldier who lost his legs in war was found dead, his mother says she's angry with how the Army has communicated with the family as it investigates his death.

"This whole thing has been screwed up since day one," Siobhan Fuller-McConnell said.

U.S. Army Sgt. Derek McConnell's fiancée **found him dead in his bed** at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md, March 18.

He had lost both his legs to an improvised explosive device while patrolling Kandahar, Afghanistan, in July 2011, but was recovering, learning to walk with prosthetic legs.

McConnell's death came as a shock, his mother said.

Her son was in good spirits, making trips between home and Walter Reed, she said. He and his fiancée were to marry soon after they **won an online contest for an \$80,000 wedding**. McConnell had hoped to retire from the military due to his injuries in June, according to his mom.



View full size

Siobhan Fuller-McConnell talks about her son and shows the dog tags of her son, after the death of U.S. Army Sgt. Derek McConnell last week after he was recovering from having both his legs blown off and the loss of the use of his right arm in Afghanistan in a July IED incident.

William Perlman/The Star-Ledger)

That all fell apart, though, after Krystina Dressler found him unresponsive while trying to wake him up for a workout at Walter Reed's Military Advanced Training Center, which features an amputee clinic.

Since then, Fuller-McConnell said, she's been given the runaround from the Army while trying to track the status of the probe into her son's death.

She said that in numerous instances, officials gave her dates upon which they said they would provide her updates — but she heard nothing or was told to wait even longer.

And while communication with officials improved a little after she reached out to Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-11) for help, the mother said she's not confident she'll get a straight answer from officials until the investigation completes.

"At this point," she said, "I'm mistrusting the whole process."

Frelinghuysen's spokesman, Steve Wilson, said the congressman "has encouraged military medical officials to expedite their investigation into the tragic death" of McConnell, "and he will continue to advocate on behalf of the family."

Fuller-McConnell said after asking for Frelinghuysen's help, she was told Army Surgeon General Patricia D. Horoho would review the investigation.

"I love him," the mother said of Frelinghuysen. "If it weren't for him, I'd probably still be sitting here in the dark, getting dates that mean nothing."

An Office of the Surgeon General of the Army spokeswoman said it couldn't discuss specifics of McConnell's medical record, citing Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act laws. The spokeswoman also said the active status of the investigation prevented it from making specific disclosures.

A Walter Reed spokeswoman referred a question for information regarding the Army's process for notifying a dead soldier's family as to his cause of death to an Armed Forces Medical Examiner System spokesman. He said he couldn't detail the process, but added that Fuller-McConnell could contact his office to speak with doctors who performed her son's autopsy.

A message to a Walter Reed spokeswoman seeking information on how the hospital typically handles updating a dead soldier's family as to his cause of death wasn't returned.

CONNECT WITH US

● **Follow us on Twitter**

● **Like us on Facebook**

● **NJ.com/morris**

Fuller-McConnell said she knew something was wrong the day her son died, when neither he nor Dressler answered her phone calls or text messages.

The mother said Dressler was told not to tell her the soldier had died, because it was Army policy that she be notified in person. But, the mother said, by 5 p.m., Dressler couldn't take it any more and called her. A couple of hours later, Fuller-McConnell was in a car with her sister and another of her sons on the way to Walter Reed.

But Fuller-McConnell said Dressler should have been able to notify her immediately after she learned her fiancée had died.

"They wanted me to wait until (the Army's Casualty Affairs & Survivors Assistance) representatives could get to me, which might not have been until the next day," Fuller-McConnell said. "I was sitting at home all day long. They couldn't find a team to notify me. They could have called the Parsippany police. Picatinny Arsenal's right up the street."

The next day, in a room with family members and Frelinghuysen, who occasionally visited McConnell and darted to the hospital when he heard he died, Fuller-McConnell was told she would "have answers" in 30 days, she said.

But when she didn't hear anything by Day 40, she got concerned and reached out to the hospital, which told her to wait another week, she said. Since then, Fuller-McConnell said, officials have given her several dates at which she they would tell her more, only to be left hanging.

Only recently has she started to get weekly calls from officials, Fuller-McConnell said. She credited Frelinghuysen's push.

Fuller-McConnell said she last heard her son's brain and heart were being prepared for follow-up testing after being told "the initial autopsy showed nothing."

© 2015 NJ.com. All rights reserved.